

Strange Places by TOWRTA

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

A madman tried to kill Ash in her own home, a rundown mansion east of Hawkins where she lives alone.

Billy's got community service to complete for beating Steve Harrington to a pulp.

Jim Hopper, Grumpy Protector of Hawkins Children Everywhere, comes up with a plan involving building maintenance, forced cohabitation, arresting abusive parents, and, hopefully, a little bit of mutual healing.

(Oh, and don't forget the Mind Flayer. He's there too.)

1. Intruder Alert

The air in here is moist and rotting and full of spores. They clog what thin shafts of moonlight manage to crack through the high windows, dirty and unreachable. When the school closed down in '32, this pool was left to stagnate. It's thickened over time, a soup of algae, almost gelatinous. Slick green moss, black mould, strange fungi sprouting from the cracking tiles – this place is an ecosystem of sponge and slime and chills that run down one's spine. A breeding ground hiding in the dark. I cover my mouth with my hand and fear it will not be enough to stop my insides being colonised.

And, in the thick green pool that has half-evaporated in the last fifty-two years, are the bodies. Joe and Mikey. Stuck face down in the gloop and unmoving in the vague light of my torch. I identify them by their football jersey numbers. Joe had a nice laugh and an easy smile and sat behind me in Math last year. Mikey was always gentle with me in dodgeball or softball or any other ball game in Phys Ed.

Why are they dead?

Where's Tyler?

God, why have you brought me here?

A boy's shout trickles through the splitting concrete roof.

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I don't meet anyone on my way, nor do I hear anyone besides the hollers of the boy – "HELP! HELP! For God's sake get me out of here!" – but when I get to the small landing and the attic door, I pause. The lock was broken recently. In the torchlight, I see the splinters of the paler, fresher interior where the wooden door was forced open. Whoever did it was strong and desperate and I hope it was the boy screaming on the other side, not someone waiting in

silence to attack.

God, give me strength.

My mouth is dry regardless, and the heavy flashlight shakes in my hand. I have no other weapons. Why would I? I'm here to investigate the history of Hawkins College. I felt safe to come at night because Tyler and his friends, the nicest ones on the football team, would be here for an overnight adventure.

I'm not here to get murdered.

"Tyler?" I choke on his name. It's so dark up here. So dark. I hate attics. I cough up the last gob of congealed spore dust on the floor and try again. "Tyler? Is there anyone else in there?"

"No!" Tyler shouts back. "Who are you? Get me *out of here!*"

I reach for the handle and try not to cry and pray *God please don't let me die* and push the door open.

The top storey of the East Wing is long space with exposed black beams and cobwebs smothering every corner. Slit windows shine pale light between free-standing cages, stretching in two rows along the entire length of the building. This is where the girls were locked up. It's icy, far below the thirty-two degrees outside. All the warmth in the world is sucked up by the steel bars, the webs, the bloated wood. I can imagine the girls locked here in their pyjamas, having been dragged from bed to have the heat leeches from their fingers and toes as their bodies scrabbled to keep hearts and lungs working. Breath misting. Tears freezing. Unable to speak a word for fear of further abuse.

I don't need my flashlight to find Tyler in the middle cage, a great mass of teenaged lineman pressed up against the bars. He's a dark, bear-like shape whose eyes glow in the moon.

"Who are you?" he asks, voice hoarse from screaming.

"Asher. Is there anyone else here?"

"No. He's gone." Tyler suddenly jerks against the bars and rattles

them. “Get me out of here!” he roars.

I dart forward, hairclip in hand, and make quick work of the rusting lock on the cage door, while Tyler explains, “He was nuts, Ash. He knocked us out and dragged us to the pool and I woke up when he threw Mikey in. I ran up here, got myself stuck in this thing. He must have heard you or something. He ran ages ago. He kept going on and on about building something, about some guy who needed him to build. He was nuts . . .” The lock relents and Tyler barely waits until I’m clear before shoving the screeching door open and scrabbling out. At eighteen, he towers in the middle of the attic, but he’s hunched, shaking. I stand too and touch his shoulder and I can feel how cold he is, even through the down jacket he wears.

“Joe, Mikey,” he mutters, looking towards the open door. His lips are black in this light.

I say what I wish someone had said to me, all those years ago, with as much feeling as I can muster even as I try to contain my horror. “I’m sorry.” I try to find that safe space within me, the one of peace and strength and wisdom. It’s not there – it’s shrivelled up and shrunk away. There’s only this trembling, growing hole of fear slowly enveloping my chest. It reaches up and closes off my throat.

Tyler Matheson, somehow, doesn’t crack. He straightens instead, takes one look around this awful place. “Let’s get out of here. We need to tell the police.”

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“So, your newspaper buddy orders you to head over to Hawkins College and you hop on your bike, ride over and, uh, find two dead bodies and a kid locked in a cage?” I nod. “And *why* did your buddy want you to check out the College in the first place?”

Chief Hopper is an intimidating man at the best of times, though whenever I meet him he tends to tone it down to merely gruff. Now,

he's downright scary. He's got two kids dead, another who barely escaped, and a murderer on the loose with my bike . . . though it could have been worse. They could have taken Tyler's car, which would have left him and I stranded miles east of Hawkins, in November, in the dark of the night.

I can understand the policeman's mood, not in the least since it's been less than two weeks since the Chicago Sun Times ran that story and Hopper's small town became a hotbed of investigators and reporters. Two dead kids? Yeah, that's not going to help quiet things down.

I just hope the news vans parked along Randolph Road at the moment don't end up outside my door.

Clasping my hands together, I fix my gaze on his Hawkins PD mug full of pencils and pens and an orange highlighter. A pencil mug is safe. A pencil mug is not an algae-infested grave or an old cage built for holding girls. A pencil mug doesn't kill people.

"It was a local history piece," I tell the mug in as stable a voice as I can manage. "Students have been going up to the school for years – they treat it like a haunted house. You know the story – of the headmaster letting those girls die? Well, my friend, who runs the school newspaper, he thought it would make a good story to find out if anything from that story was true and if there are any traces of what went on still left. I was going to go up tomorrow with a camera if I found anything tonight."

"Why tonight?" says Hopper. "Why not during the day?"

"A pipe burst in the downstairs bathroom this morning. It took all day to fix it."

Hopper is incredulous. "You could have gone tomorrow. In *daylight*."

"My friend wanted the story. And I knew Tyler and – and his friends were, uhm, over there for the weekend. I wasn't scared." *Then*.

"Well . . ." Hopper groans and rubs his face, looking suddenly haggard. This past year has not been easy on anyone, least of all our

chief of police, and it shows. He's exhausted. My heart goes out to him, what little piece of it isn't curled up in a corner, hiding.

He drops his hand, gives me a quick hint of a grateful smile. "You probably saved that boy's life, tonight. Good job."

"Thank you," I whisper, looking back at the pencil mug again.

"I'll get one of my men to take your statement, then they'll drive you home." He checks his watch and imperceptibly slumps. "It's going to be a late night. Wait here." He stands, comes around the desk and briefly rests his hand on my shoulder as he goes. Alone in his tiny office that's really too small for such a big man, I keep looking at the mug.

Then curiosity, that well-nourished trait of mine, nudges me to look at the papers around the mug.

There are police reports, eye witness statements, the Hawkins Post article from November seventh that reran the Chicago Sun Times story. Barbara Holland's pleasant face smiles next to a picture of the blocky Hawkins Laboratory. A chemical leak. I scoff quietly. "Right, even though Barb lived on the other side of town."

Oh, now that's interesting.

An A4 piece of paper covered in writing, with *SDPD – Desk Sergeant* written on the top. If I'm not mistaken, it's Hopper's handwriting. It doesn't take much reading to understand what it's about; a series of questions and the desk sergeant's answers, all related to a certain ex-officer of his, recently moved from San Diego. And that officer's son. Seems like Hopper wrote down a telephone conversation. He even signed and dated the bottom of the page. Sunday the 28th of October, three weeks ago.

. . . yeah, the boy . . . nah, kids need a thrashing sometimes, 'specially troublemaker like that. Though, I've seen Hargrove with some perps . . . I'd hate to be in that house on a bad day . . .

It's nice to have a pet-theory validated. I hoped Billy Hargrove hadn't been born with violence already cemented in his psyche and here is

the proof. His father is, at least, in part to blame.

I pull the paper closer towards me, then get distracted by what's underneath it. An adoption form? With Hopper's signature too. That's something to add to The Wall. The name of the adoptee is covered by the interview . . .

"Powell will take your statement and give you a lift on our way out to the College," Hopper declares behind me. I shoot to my feet and face him, an innocent expression hastily erected, though it leans towards terror more than anything. Hopper just frowns. He jerks his head for me to follow him into the waiting area of the precinct. It's a stub of corridor linking the bull pen to the front entrance and to the back offices and holding cells. Tyler sits on the long wooden bench next to the kitchenette with its untouched instant coffee and ancient teabags. Flo's desk is opposite, the guard dog of the bull pen. Tyler sees me and attempts to smile. Mrs Matheson, a lady half his size, clings to his hands.

"How're you feeling?" I ask, pausing in front of him. Hopper goes into the bull pen to talk to one of his men.

Tyler shrugs. "I'll be okay."

I touch his shoulder again, the extent of my comforting techniques. "Hang in there, big guy."

Suddenly he envelopes me in a hug. He's warm, finally, and no longer shaking. "Thanks, Ash," he murmurs into my ear.

I pat his broad back and dread going home.

Tyler pulls away and then it's Mrs Matheson and as her spindly arms come around me and she tugs me into her small, cosy embrace, I find myself on the edge of awful, snot-filled sobs. I can't handle this. I can't handle any of it. Smiling, nodding at her thank yous, I extricate myself and hurry out into the cold and the space and freedom from grateful, loving mothers.

While Hopper's Chevy continues along Cornwallis to that pine stand on the other side of the prairie, where Hawkins College waits inside, Officer Powell turns onto my drive. He pulls up, peers through the windshield, and whistles. "I always thought this place was haunted."

"Just by me," I sigh.

"I don't envy you."

"I don't envy me either."

"Ever think about renovating?"

"I tried once. Then school and journalism got in the way. Well, thanks for the lift."

"You sure you're gonna be all right?"

I slide out of the passenger seat. "I've been here seventeen years. Another night won't kill me."

"Hey." He leans over the gearstick towards me. "Call the station if you've got any problems. Callahan's on night shift. And the Chief and I will check in when we come back from the College." He glances at the house and shudders. "Hate to imagine you being alone here after the night you've had."

"Thanks, Officer Powell."

The soft-spoken Calvin Powell smiles. "Call me Cal."

"Will do."

He touches his hat and straightens up. I close the passenger door, moving closer to the house so he has room to turn on the gravel drive. The car heads along the prairie road, takes a left, and goes east, after his Chief. I track the cruiser by the beams of yellow flickering through the tallgrass and the twin red dots that rise and fall and curve with the gently undulating land. The thrum and drone of the engine fades in and out of hearing. Then the car vanishes into the

trees. Silence snaps. Crickets, rattling tallgrass, the babbling of hidden brooks and their croaking squatters amongst the frozen soil, the constant orchestra of the night swells in the absence of humanity. Fifteen miles in the other direction, Cornwallis Road enters another pine forest that separates my lonely prairie from Hawkins proper.

I feel very, very alone.

Above, the vast sky glitters, dense clouds of stars thick and bright in the absence of the moon. They bathe the landscape in silver and, far in the distance, the brilliant nightscape lands on the hills of the northern horizon. There is enough faith in me, even after today, to be impressed by Roane County's display.

But tonight I don't want to linger in the sub-zero temperatures. I want a closed door and a cup of tea and the crackling kitchen fire to beat back the terror.

So I turn to the monstrosity that is my home. It's an 1882 nightmare of black-stained weatherboards and fish scale shingles clinging to the steep mansard roofs. As I told Cal, only I haunt this place. There were once people with me. Mom and Dad and Kato lived in this house and filled it with their voices and their noise and their ambitions that took them away.

An old, well-worn dream plays out before I can stop it; the porch light flicking on and the door opening and someone – a mother? A friend? A boyfriend? – saying, "What are you doing? You'll catch your death out there? Come in, there's dinner on the table," and the fire would be already lit . . .

Stop it, Ash. You're only hurting yourself.

Into the shadows of the porch then, where the starlight does not reach, fingertips on the iron knob in the centre of the door. The heavy slab of oak swings. It's never locked. Groping past the leadlight panels around the door, finding the switch, flicking it down with a thunk. The fake candles in the electric chandelier start to heat. It's always a good minute before they shed enough light to see by and I pass straight under the brightening filaments, avoiding the sideboard and the newel post of the central staircase and the ticking

grandfather clock and making for the unearthly red light throbbing at the back of the house. The air gets warmer as I walk down the narrow passage between the dining room and the bathroom under the stairs – though not by much. Just enough to not be freezing.

The embers are still hot in the hearth and with two new logs and careful blowing, flames start to lick at the bark. I sit cross-legged on the yellow linoleum and stare at the fire as it grows and breathe in the aroma of burning pine wood.

This is safe. This isn't a dank pool made of mould. This isn't a frozen cage. This isn't a crying mother. It's just me and the flames and God – somewhere – and if I have to sit here all night and stoke the fire in order to not . . . succumb, then so be it. How could I sleep tonight, anyway?

I stare at the fire. The old house creaks around me. The entrance hall chandelier at last reaches its dim zenith.

Get me out of here!

“Shush,” I whisper.

Mikey. Joe. Face down. Bright white numbers – twelve and three – illuminated in my torch.

“You're okay.”

God, why have you brought me here?

I hug myself. I'm fine. I'm going to be fine. God is with me. God is –

What's that?

An engine roars down Cornwallis Road and it's not the Chief's or Cal's or any police vehicle's. This engine growls, tearing at the night. I wait, listening. Frown. It's turned onto my drive.

So I get up and leave the kitchen, passing through the narrow passage again with its slightly ajar bathroom door and firmly shut dining room. Into the entrance hall. Here is the sideboard with its hideous heirloom vase and rotary phone. Here the Hawkins College founder

and headmaster W.J. Morell glares at me from his portrait. Here are the doors to the music room and parlour that are never opened. Here is the hideous orange carpet tracking up the stairs. And here is the glare of approaching headlights through the green-and-gold leadlight windows around the door. I squint. Is that Van Halen playing on the car's stereo?

I groan. Of all the nights for Tod Bacliff to pull this stupid prank – of all the *people* to pull this prank on. Gah. This can't be happening.

A floorboard creaks behind me and I twist to look out of reflex – this house is often louder than me, bending and shifting in the wind – but then the car skids to a halt and I turn back.

Arms strangle me from behind.

My scream is cut off. I scratch at skeletal, jaundiced elbow, drawing blood, achieving nothing but to make them choke me tighter. Prickling darkness starts to swarm, a million tiny dots flickering on and off at the edges of my vision. They drag me into the kitchen and away from the new arrival and no matter how I kick, how I claw and scrabble and whine, they're too strong.

"He needs me," he breathes in my ear, hot and foul.

The engine cuts out, door slamming. "Bacliff!"

He throws me onto the lino between the kitchen table and the icebox. I lunge for the fire poker and get kicked for my trouble, thrown onto my back. He grasps me by the wrist and his cold weight presses me into the lino.

"Get off," I croak.

The skeletal man snarls, his teeth glinting in the flickering firelight. Spit collects at the corners of his mouth in his laughter.

"He needs me. He needs my help. He's going to rebuild the world and he wants me to do it. And he needs you." His voice is sibilant, lisping. Insanity dwells in those yellow eyes, the black veins. His tongue is grey. He's freezing and sweating and looks as sick as a dog.

He's the spitting image of his grandfather, right down the W.J. on his blazer.

"Get off!" I screech. I drive a knee between his legs. He jerks and falls face-first into the grate, screams, releasing me to paw at the burning ash on his face. I scramble out from under him.

A newcomer enters the kitchen to see me scrabbling away from W.J. Morell's mad grandson. "The hell?" he says, and then he jerks back because Morell is at him like a snake, hissing and spitting and going for the eyes.

The newcomer punches Morell across the face and Morell falls against the icebox. The newcomer hits again, again, again. At last Morell collapses and sprawls, unconscious, on the floor.

"Thanks," I say, panting, scared . . . so, so thankful to Tod Bacliff.

The newcomer has a mullet, a leather jacket, a black wife beater, and appears nothing more than intrigued despite the fact that he just knocked out a total stranger. The fire casts him into sharp plains of red and gold and black and reveals a catholic medal shining on his chest. He hooks a thumb into a belt loop.

"Who the hell is that?" demands Billy Hargrove.

I flop to the floor and start to cry, half-hysterical with laughter.

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This has been a weird night. From that soon-to-be-beaten-to-a-pulp moron Bacliff giving him the wrong address on purpose – Billy really should have known that 'mansion on the prairie' *wasn't* a prime party spot – to being attacked by some murderous bastard in said mansion and a strange girl having a mental breakdown on the kitchen floor . . . was this Bacliff's idea of a prank? Surely not.

Then again, this was Hawkins, where government labs have chemical leaks that kill people and RadioShack workers get eaten by wolves. Who knows what the residents consider 'all in good fun'.

This town is a bloody nightmare.

The girl called the police too, just to make this night even more hellish. The Chief himself is on his way over. The Chief, who, alone in this town, knows exactly why the Hargrove family moved to Hawkins, and who has had Billy on a leash ever since he beat Steve Harrington half to death a fortnight ago. Billy's community service is yet to be sorted out, which is a joke because Harrington didn't press charges but still the Chief dragged Billy into his office the day after the incident and declared that he is going to do the damn time or else and in a small town like Hawkins, Jim Hopper *is* the law so you better shut up and listen, kid, because I'm doing you a favour and I'm not your father.

Whatever *that* meant. Cops are all the same. His dad. Hopper. Everyone in San Diego PD who looked the other way when his old man would take a nightstick into the cells. Cops don't care about the law. They care about how much they can twist the law, how they can use it as leverage, a threat, a *we're out here because I had to clean up your mess, boy, be grateful you're not in juvie.*

He'd prefer juvie.

Billy takes a drag from the cigarette and hates everything. Especially the psycho jabbering away, slumped on the porch. Every time he comes to he goes on and on about building, "*-Build, I have to build, he needs more to build with-*" So Billy does him a favour and kicks him in the head so he doesn't have to worry about building. A careful kick, though. It wouldn't do to get the man's blood on his boots. The stuff is black and sticky and looks contagious. It took forever to clean off his knuckles.

The truck Billy's been tracking across the prairie finally turns onto the drive. A squad car trails behind it. The cavalry have arrived, though not from the direction of town. Hopefully they'll take the bastard away and he can drive off to some girl's house where it's *warm.*

The girl comes out of the house. "Finally," she whispers as she passes him, avoids the psycho laid out at Billy's feet, and waits on the steps for the police. She wraps her arms around one of the support beams

and Billy takes the time to examine her now that she's not crying or calling the cavalry.

Who is she? That's Billy's biggest question of the night, even more than why she was being attacked by the living skeleton in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere with no one else in sight.

She looks like Mom.

If his mom was a teenager who dresses like she lives in the fifties and has never seen the Californian sun. What teenager wears fur-lined ankle boots and a shirtwaist dress and a flaring coat like that? It's the *eighties*.

The only thing current about her is her hair – thick bangs and masses of blonde hair crushed under a beanie. It's tangled and unkempt. Billy's mother's hair was blonde too, thinner, shorter, completely different if he thinks about it, but he can't get the association out of his head. When the girl looked at him and her blue eyes were reddened and glistening and the tear tracks down her cheeks and yet she was pretty, really pretty, exactly like . . .

He never expected it. That's what has him thrown right now. All the other Hawkins High girls are frumpy and boring and he'd grown used to that, used to having everything here be a disappointment compared to San Diego and then *this* girl turns up. This girl who is dressed out of time, has a face that both is and isn't his mother's, and apparently lives all alone in this creepy murder mansion in the middle of nowhere, and he just saved her life.

She's not Mom, he tells himself and sucks in another lungful of smoke. His mother's gone. His mother left him. Just because she's blonde and she was crying on the floor after being attacked by some violent bastard it *doesn't* mean anything.

He studiously doesn't think about why he didn't just tie the psycho up and split ages ago.

Hopper, swollen in khaki and small-town importance, thumps to the gravel and trudges over to them. He sums them up in a second – Billy raises an unconcerned eyebrow in return – and makes the girl sit on

the step. He and Officer Powell, the black one, approach Billy. “What you doin’ here, Hargrove?” Hopper asks while he and Powell hoist the psycho up.

“Doing your job, Chief,” he drawls, and he grinds the cigarette butt under his heel and lights up another and doesn’t lift a finger to help. Hopper just shakes his head and directs the efforts to get the psycho into the back of the truck.

Then Hopper approaches the girl on the step, considers her, taps her on the shoulder.

And she *screams*.

“Sorry,” she blurts out. “Sorry, I’m just – I – Tonight –”

“Hey, hey,” says Hopper, “It’s been a long night. I get it.” He looks up at Hopper, eyes narrowing, then glances back at Powell. How he can see anything under those thick eyebrows, Billy doesn’t know. The dude’s a frickin’ bear.

“Hargrove?”

“Chief.”

“You’re staying here tonight.”

“Excuse me?” says Billy.

The girl’s head snaps up. The bearded wonder leans away from her, shoves his hands in his pockets. “It’ll be part of your community service. You get to help Asher renovate her house for the next month.”

“What the hell does that have to do with *spending the night*?”

“She shouldn’t be alone.”

Billy wants to throw something at him. “Call her parents.”

A silence descends, long and uncomfortable, in which Billy is missing something and he hates it and Hopper waits for the girl, Asher, to say

something.

"They left," she whispers, audible in the quiet of the night.

Billy raises both eyebrows. "When?" he asks.

"1974."

"You would have been, what, seven?"

"Eight. My older brother was here." She refuses to look at him. He can make out the side of her face and her glazed over eyes that are seeing something beyond him and the wary police officers.

"What happened to him?"

"He left too. 1978."

She'd've been about twelve then. Billy absently realises she must be a senior, like him, and somehow he's never noticed her in his four weeks at Hawkins High. The girl's a ghost. "How the hell are you not in the system?"

Asher looks at Hopper then. He takes over the story. "Made a deal with a couple at the local church," he explains. "Small town, bud. We look out for each other here. Right." Hopper claps his hands. "Give me your statements and then we'll clear out and we can all get some sleep. It's been a long night for everyone. Hargrove, I'll call your dad, don't worry 'bout him."

Punching the chief of police would be a bad idea. Billy repeats it over and over while he lights a third smoke and listens to Asher tell of being dropped off by Powell and then being jumped in her own house by the grandson of a headmaster who built her house and some college and then Billy turning up.

Billy, in as few words as possible, explains Bacliff's misdirection.

Hopper, for Billy's sake, explains in as few words as possible that Morell, the psycho, is suspected of murdering two kids up at said college and trying to kill a third, and they'll need to drain the pool to find the bodies, and that he left Asher's bike a few metres down the

road from her drive's turnoff. Hopper produces the bike from the back of the truck. Asher wheels it around the side of the house and Hopper takes the opportunity to join Billy on the porch.

"You see why you need to stay the night?" he asks. It's not a question. "You screwed up with Harrington. This is your chance to fix that."

"By painting her house?" Billy drawls.

"She's been through a nightmare tonight. You're gonna make sure she's okay, and that means not leaving her alone in the house where she was almost *killed*."

"And you want *me* to do that? You're scraping the bottom of the barrel here, Chief."

"You're the one who saved her. That counts for something. And for better or worse, you're all she's got tonight."

Asher returns, crunching over gravel. Powell gives her a sad smile, a pat on the arm. "How are you doing?" he asks.

She murmurs, too low to be heard. Hopper claps Billy on the shoulder and stomps down the porch steps. "We'll be going," he says. "Lock the doors, get some food in you. Billy's going to keep you safe."

Asher's eyes meet his. She doesn't seem so sure. That makes two of them.

The police clear out without ceremony. Billy's Camaro, gleaming silver under the stars, remains. He could jump in and drive and say to hell with the consequences. No one tells him what to do – especially not a pig.

Except . . .

Her throat and wrists are red. They've darkened as the night has passed. Tomorrow morning they'll be ghastly purple. He can't stop himself from remembering.

More than that, he can't stop a very old, very childish fantasy from

resurfacing. He once thought of himself as his mother's knight in shining armour, standing between her and her attacker, biding the time until he could whisk her away to a safe haven somewhere green and beautiful and right by the sea.

Then she left – and he can't blame her for it, and can't blame her for leaving him with Neil because Neil had the cops and Neil needed a punching bag and Neil was stronger than any fairy tale villain – and the fantasy died. He was no one's saviour.

"You're the one who saved her. That counts for something."

Could he . . . ?

Damn it, he thought he'd outgrown this. The world is hard and cruel and you either sink or swim because no one's going to throw you a rope. That's what living alone with Neil taught him.

Neil's not here.

She looks like Mom.

Both her parents *and* her brother left her.

She was just almost-murdered.

Something flickers inside Billy's chest, something he only ever feels around Max and ruthlessly crushes because his step-sister's got to learn to survive and he can't come to her rescue.

"You're the one who saved her. That counts for something."

Shut the hell up, Jim.

"Oi," he calls down to her. She jumps, swivels on the gravel. "You hungry?"

She touches her stomach, then her neck. "A bit." She sounds surprised by the answer.

"Fine. Show me what you've got in your cupboards." He drops his last cigarette for the night and stomps into the house. The girl who

isn't his mother follows. He makes sure to lock the front door after her.

2. The Questions

Church is supposed to be a safe haven. A place of communion with God and his people. After a horrible night lying awake in bed and being stared at by the dozens of eyes on The Wall in the light of my bedside lamp, and after riding a bike that was last ridden by my attempted-murderer for forty minutes through the pure darkness of six o'clock in the morning in November, I thought I could warm up at church, drink some tea from the urn, sing a few songs, and feel better.

It worked. During rehearsal. The songs were ones we'd done a million times, the band the same one I joined when I was twelve, the tea the same unnameable concoction that it has been since the church was planted in 1923. I sat on the edge of the wooden stage and croaked along to the guitarist and the pianist and the drummer and waited for my vocal cords to warm up. By the grace of God, Morell's strangulation had not made me lose my voice.

The guitarist and pianist and drummer were all cheerful and kind, as usual. They bantered with each other, laughed when they messed up, and complained about the weather. The guitarist and pianist sang as well. The drummer joined in, badly. It was fun for them. It would have been fun for me, if I wasn't so exhausted, so on edge and taking care not to let anyone see my throat or wrists. I adjusted my scarf every few minutes.

"I'm okay," I murmured when they asked. "Tired. Bad night's sleep."

"Have a nap before service," suggested the drummer, a big black man named Gus who is twenty-four and I often watch draw pictures in his sketchbook. Gus copies comic book styles and designs the pamphlets and posters for church fundraisers and created the reputation of our church being the 'hip' one in town. We are also the only Pentecostal church, which gave us a certain 'radical' image. We use a *guitar* in our worship sets. We only take communion once a month.

"Good idea."

"From the top?" he suggested to all of us at large, and we began the

song again. Ten minutes until rehearsal was over. Forty until service started. The front left row of seats where the musicians normally sat started to look really appealing by the time we got to second verse. I could stretch out on the heavy, padded chairs for half an hour. No one disturbed the musicians.

Then I saw Mr Weaver, the deacon, come into the small, brown auditorium with his son, Patrick. They paused to talk to the pastor, and all three paused to look at me, and I got a *really* bad feeling.

The bad feeling was justified. Fifteen minutes into my thirty-minute nap that wasn't working, Mrs Buttermann – "*Josie, darling, Josie*" – approached me and whispered, "Oh, you poor dear, how are you feeling?"

And then it just got worse.

It felt as if every eye in the church was staring into the back of my head, and then into my face when I was on the stage, and then following me after service as I ducked into the bathroom to change into my riding clothes. Then it was weaving through the chattering groups in the auditorium and the foyer and then at the front entrance, and trying not to blink. Every time I blinked, my eyes threatened to stay shut.

The Moores, the elderly couple tasked with keeping an eye on me, try to flag me down. I love them, truly, even if their age and my school commitments have stopped us being as close as we were when Kato first left, but today I am not of a mood to put on a smile. I wave and keep heading for the exit.

I almost escaped unscathed. I was at the oak tree, at the edge of the church parking lot. The church itself is a low, boxy building converted from an old storage warehouse. As with all new movements in the Christian faith, Pentecostalism has tried to do away with any symbols or rituals, and to return to the fundamental tenants of Christ. I wonder how long it will last. Soon enough a new movement will begin and will declare Pentecostalism obsolete and bogged down with insincere tradition. It's the way of the world. New translations of the Bible, new songs, new names for the same positions in the church. Some people in the church get so worked up

about all the different denominations and how each one has got something wrong and so on and I can't help but think that, if these people stopped complaining about how everything has gone wrong, they might find they have the time to look around and see that there are better things to do with this time on earth.

I have the personal philosophy of 'each to their own'. Some people like coriander, some people can't stand it. Some people are born mathematicians, some people are born to dance. Some people find the quiet motions of old traditions to be soothing, others need the intensity and spirit of the new to get them through the day. We're all different. God made us that way. And, surely, if He made us to be different, He made us to celebrate and worship Him in different ways too.

After all, life would be boring if we did everything the same way as everyone else.

Though, in that church parking lot, being watched on all sides – church gossip circles are only beaten by school ones, and I am *not* looking forward to tomorrow, Monday – and having Jermaine Clutha bear down on me, I could have done with my life being a bit more boring.

“Asher!”

I held onto the handlebars of my bike, released from being chained to the tree. I inhaled, steeled myself, and faced him.

As usual, Jermaine Clutha wore a bowtie and corduroy blazer and round glasses and stood a head shorter than me. The bullies at school nicknamed him Buttercup. Butter. Yellow. Jermaine's half Chinese. It verges on clever.

We have been friends since we were eight, not long after Mom and Dad left. He found me, alone and teary-eyed, in the school library and promptly asked me if I was following the Watergate Scandal.

I wasn't. He told me about it. Thus started a ten year friendship based on journalism, true crime, the newspaper club and . . . it might be the exhaustion talking, but I couldn't figure out what else our friendship

constituted.

“I had to hear from *Patrick* that you were almost killed last night?” Jermaine started. “Asher, I can’t have journalists shirking their work! I’m trying to get into Harvard, Asher, *Harvard*. You have to call me when something like this happens. We need the story first! Otherwise we’ll never be ahead of the game. The fact that I had to hear it from *Patrick Weaver* of all people.”

Across the road is the Episcopalian church, where the sedater churchgoers of Hawkins were filing out to go to Sunday lunches and bridge clubs and the sports fields. They spared curious glances at us, some families pausing entirely to take in the scene. Our own Pentecostal church family did the same from the safety of their cars and the front entrance and the foyer windows.

In one of said windows was Mr Weaver, the deacon, whose wife was the night secretary on the phone when I called in about Morell’s invasion. Patrick, her son, two years younger than Jermaine and I, watched open mouthed next to him.

Small towns, man. Is nothing sacred here?

“You’re off!”

I tuned back in. “What?”

“We won’t be needing you on the team anymore.” Jermaine flicked open his ever-present black notebook and started scribbling. “I have your most recent photographs of The Wall, we just need the articles themselves. Bring them in tomorrow.” He snapped the book shut and sighed. “Look, Asher. I’m sorry about this. But we all have to make sacrifices for our dreams.”

And, just like that – just like *them* – he walked away. He got in his band-aid coloured Chevy Nova. It’s an unaggressive, bubble-shaped thing. Billy’s Camaro would eat it alive.

I watched my oldest and only friend drive down the oak-lined Maybelle Avenue, turn left before the arcade, and disappear into the upper-middle class haven of Elm Street.

Now, pushing off on my bike and turning right onto Cornwallis, I remember what else our friendship consisted of. Rides to and from school during winter, when the snow on the prairie is thick and soft and impossible to bike through.

Darn it.

At least Cornwallis is pretty. It branches off the northern highway to cut through the centre of Hawkins, the veers east to the prairie and the College. The northern stretch of Cornwallis is surrounded by suburbia, recently built houses from people fleeing the big cities to find smaller ponds in which to fish. The south-eastern, where I bike now, is a quiet tunnel surrounded by pine trees that have lost most of their needles, maples that drop golden leaves onto the old asphalt. Farm fields appear sporadically. I cross the train tracks and long drives to older houses start to appear at random. The Harringtons' house is down this end of town. I've never known why. It's pool and its courtyard and its manicured lawn should be up near Loch Nora, not down here by Benny's Burgers and the Hawkins Lab and the Byers' home. This is, after all, the weird end of town. Parents have started stopped their children from playing south-east of the train tracks for fear of the many accidents and oddities that happen around here. Benny's suicide and Barb's poisoning and Bob's dying in that wolf attack. Sattler's Quarry through the trees, where they found the body of the boy who wasn't Will.

Joe. Mikey. Tyler. Morell.

Me.

Cornwallis isn't so pretty anymore. The deep shadows amongst the barren trees move in the corners of my eyes as I bike past. I focus on the road ahead and the strip of pale blue between the trees above. I'm fine. I'm fine. Nothing's going to hurt me. For God is my strength, my rock and my redeemer, my saviour –

Except he didn't save Joe and Mikey, did He?

Shut up.

Where was He today in the parking lot?

SHUT UP.

Why did He let Morell into your house?

Billy was there. He used Billy to protect me. He –

Billy.

Billy's alone in my house. Unsupervised. He's going to see it. He'll see The Wall.

Oh, screw you, Jermaine Clutha!

Love is not angry, first Corinthians thirteen.

“Shut up,” I pant, and I bike faster into the frozen wind.

.

The girl has to be nuts. She didn't seem like it last night – she seemed traumatised and wired and told him where to find things in the cupboards and ate the broccoli soup he'd found in the freezer and then disappeared up to her room after cursorily waving at the bathroom and a bedroom across the landing from hers on the third floor, and he's willing to bet she didn't sleep a wink – but after trawling through her house for five curious and quickly disturbing minutes, Billy is decided. She's nuts. No sane person could live in the place.

He wrinkles his nose, pauses, and sneezes. Billy was not a clean freak, he'd be the first to admit, but this was going too far.

Sue him for being curious, all right? He wanted to know what Hopper roped him into. Asher had slipped a note under the door saying she was out at church and would be home for lunch, which he found when he woke up a little past eleven. He showered in the tiny bathroom between his and her rooms, smoked through the open bathroom window that had swollen in the frame and refused to shut.

Then he stole a vintage leather jacket he found in the closet in his room and went exploring.

Munching on toast from the outdated kitchen (retro is too kind a word; *archaic* is more appropriate, considering the monstrous black stove that could sink a battleship), Billy went from door to door and found cobwebs, ornamental plates of English landscapes, mouldering curtains and spindly furniture and dark, dark panelling on all the walls. He found a dining room that was a graveyard for flies. A parlour or a drawing room or whatever that rotted away in the dark under its dust sheets. A music room that held an surprisingly still-in-tune piano, and a harp. Caught in the musty space with a looming painting of W.J. Morell over the fireplace, twin to the one in the entrance hall, Billy sneezes again and starts to see why Ash keeps these downstairs rooms closed.

If he was in her shoes, he'd burn the whole lot and be done with it. Sometimes arson is the best solution.

"My parents bought the house and restored it to how it was built in 1882. I don't think they'd like me to change anything. Their job is restoring old properties like this."

That's what she said last night when he asked why she hadn't done something about the awful kitchen. She didn't even have a bloody pantry; she had a weird cabinet thing, like a writing desk but for food. She'd fallen into a far-gazing silence and Billy didn't want to disturb her and went back to washing the dishes, trying not to remember all the others times he'd washed dishes while a pretty blonde sat at the kitchen table and saw the phantoms of last night's terrors in the middle distance.

Billy guesses the situation with her parents is complicated. He knows a little about that, and knows enough not to pry.

He sneers at W.J. Morell and goes up the hideous orange-carpeted stairs to investigate further.

There's no natural light in the stairwell. His bedroom window depicts puffball clouds in a cornflower sky, countless acres of waving tallgrass and bright yellow goldenrods and luscious red cardinals and

pink explosions of muhly grass, the last hurrah before winter sets. Farms to the south, the hills to the north, the quiet hum of Sunday morning Hawkins to the west, which he could see from that side of the house. It is a singularly beautiful day on the Indiana prairie and it stunned Billy to see it when he woke up, as very little has stunned him so far in Hawkins. It is no southern Cali beach with twenty-foot swells and the never-ending horizon of the Pacific. But the view on the prairie isn't bad. It's tranquil. Ain't that a word he has rare opportunity to use.

Inside the house, it's anything but. Silent, yes, still, yes, but not tranquil. He feels more watched and more oppressed with every door he opens, every step he ascends. He's a child of California, brought up in New Age wave of the seventies with a free-spirited mother who liked to wear amethyst and hung packets of spices on doorframes for good luck. Billy has a healthy appreciation for the *other side*, even if he doesn't show it at school. This house . . . it rubs him wrong. He doesn't touch the curving handrail that winds up through the centre of the house. He is relieved when the doors branching off the second floor landing don't open. More and more, he understands Asher's failure to change this house. It doesn't *want* to be changed. It wants to be left alone, to glower and gather dust and squat on the Indiana prairie under a sky it should never have been built to see. His mother would have called it a lost cause, a house broken before the first foundations were set in place, bad from the beginning. Something about the maker's mind being twisted.

If Billy felt a tiny flicker of compassion for Asher last night, he definitely pities her now. Living here, in W.J. Morell's home, alone for *six years*. What does that do to a person's mind?

What does living with Neil Hargrove do to a person's mind?

Steve Harrington might have a few ideas.

He bypasses her room and his and goes up to the fourth floor, finds empty bedrooms of the same layout as his. A creaking queen bed with a desk shoved in next to it, a shallow closet, walls paper in a pale green that was probably designed for a looney bin. The fireplace is boarded up, same as his, and the high ceiling is decorated like some sort of frosted plaster cake, with roses and vines and grapes.

Billy opens the curtains just to let the light in, forces up the sash just to breathe. Dusty spider silk flutters in the thin morning breeze.

He fumbles for the pack in the leather jacket pocket. Three seconds later, smoke is in his lungs, and ten seconds later the nicotine hits his brain, and he can think a little more clearly. Back to exploring.

He's not afraid to open the attic door.

He's just already over the creaking rocking chair or dusty noose or whatever stupid haunted house gimmick waits behind it. Billy Hargrove is a Hargrove man and even though he hates most Hargrove men, they at least don't let fear stop them.

A stab of disappointment hits him. Six walls, a skylight, and the trunks of chimneys from the dining room and parlour and kitchen and music room that run all the way up the house and connect to the other rooms. The chimneys skirt between the rafters to escape through the ceiling.

Huh. Boring.

Lug up a bench, a dumbbell rack, a mat, maybe a skipping rope, this place could work pretty well as a gym. The floor's plenty sturdy that it won't collapse if he dropped a weighted barbell on it.

He heads back downstairs to the third floor and pauses outside the single room he has left until last, smoke trailing from the corner of his mouth, fists jammed in the pockets of the jacket. It would be rude to go in there. Mom said that a woman's room is sacred.

Yeah. Screw that. Mom's gone and he's desecrated enough women's rooms to not care anymore.

(The churning in his gut he puts down to the girl's homemade blackberry jam he had on his toast. It must have been off.)

Grinning a grin that's more teeth than humour, Billy strides into Asher's room.

Stops.

Stares.

Damn.

She *is* nuts.

A bike crunches up the gravel drive towards the house. He ignores it, fully willing to be caught in her room. There's no way she gets the moral high ground in this situation. Not with . . . this.

Her room is the mirror image of his except for the bookshelf full of fraying paperbacks and one other, glaring difference. The walls.

She's got them covered in photos and newspaper articles and handwritten notes stuck on with scotch tapes. They fill every bare inch of space, from behind her bed to the back of the door to the sides of the armoire. Photos cluster in age groups. The current Hawkins High cohort is splattered above her desk – he sees her yearbook photo, takes note of her appropriate last name. The Hawkins Middle group hovers next to the window. Billy ignores the images of Hopper and the police and the older crowds and moves to the array above the desk.

There. Right of the centre, his photo and the photo of that punk black kid, and a newspaper article.

San Diego High Journal

Billy Hargrove put David Westley in hospital on Monday –

Billy doesn't rip the paper down, though impulse wants him to. He waits instead, hearing her crash through the front door and shout, "Billy!" She runs up the stairs. His lip curls and he lights another cigarette to do something with his hands. Otherwise he might do something else that will get him into trouble with Hopper.

And there she is, panting and sweaty and hair a mess in the doorway of her room, carrying a jacket and scarf and bag. Her face, her legs, her arms and neck are pinked by exertion in cold air. He's glad to see that in shape she's different to his mother – his mother was tall and willowy. Asher Strange is shorter, stronger, denser. She's wearing biker shorts and a t-shirt that clings. The bruises around her wrists

and throat are vividly purple.

“Morning,” he drawls, smoke licking at the corners of his lips.

“I can explain,” she says.

“Go ahead,” he replies. He looks forward to seeing her flail.

“My friend –” She checks herself, mouth twisting. “A guy I know from the newspaper club had me put it up.”

“Did he now?” Billy grins around the cigarette. “I’d love to hear to reason.”

She slumps against the doorframe, breathing a little steadier. The sweat will be starting to cool and will make her chilled and uncomfortable. Good. She deserves it for being a voyeur. Billy holds few things dear. His privacy is one of them.

“He, uhm, he gave me the records keeper role for the school newspaper. He said that because I live alone, I could make the collage and not get in trouble for it.”

“So he was using you?”

“No, he . . .” She groans and thumps her head against the frame. “Yes. He was using me.” She mutters under her breath. It might be *bastard*. “He had me put that up when we got to high school because he wanted to monitor current events. But, I mean, this is Hawkins; before last year we didn’t *have* any current events. And you know what he did today? He reamed me out for not calling him about last night in front of everyone at church.”

“How does he know?” Billy demands.

“Mrs Weaver, the station’s night secretary, she told her husband and her son everything and they told everyone this morning at church. They know about your community service, too. The whole school’s gonna know by tomorrow.”

Billy swears. She grimaces in commiseration. “Sorry. Small town. Everyone knows everything here.”

While this has been fascinating and all, but it hasn't answered what Billy really wants to know. He rips down his article, the one about him beating David Westley, the punk kid who'd made a joke about Max – not that the newspaper cared about *that* – and crumples it in his fist. He takes two steps towards her and holds up the ball of paper. "Where did you get this?" he asks, low and dangerous.

She is suitably wary of him and licks her lips. "Jermaine had me look you up when you arrived. I found the name of your school in your records and called up the head of the newspaper there. They sent me that last week. Do you, uh, want to take it?"

He raises an eyebrow.

"I don't want it," she says sincerely, a little desperately. "I'm sorry I ever saw it. Seriously. I shouldn't have pried into your private life. Here, take the other stuff too." She passes around him and carefully peels off two pieces of paper. They're both cuttings of marriage announcements, tiny little square photos above the names. The groom's name stays the same. The woman is different in each.

Billy takes in the tiny black-and-white photo of his mother, smiling giddily next to his father. She has no idea what's in store for her. He wants to reach through time and tell her not to go through with it. It wouldn't even matter that he wouldn't be alive. At least she'd be safe.

Asher loiters under her bedroom's glass lampshade, rocking from side to side as if about to fall. She has huge black circles under her eyes and is pale and starting to shiver. Seeing her exhaustion makes him feel tired.

"I think your dad is a piece of work," she offers.

He doesn't want to fight her, not now, not with this scrap of paper in his hand. "So is your newspaper buddy," he replies. "What are you going to do with all this?" He gestures with his cigarette at unorthodox wallpaper.

"Burn it," she says.

"Yeah? Want help?"

A few minutes into the first renovation project of Billy's community service, he tells me to take a shower because my shivering is making him feel cold.

I give him a few parameters. "Leave anything related to Benny Hammond, Barbara Holland, Bob Newby, and Will Byers. Oh, and Hawkins Lab." He frowns at me, a tad disturbed.

"Weren't you kicked off the newspaper team?"

"I still like journalism. I was thinking about some things on the bike ride home," I reply while snatching clean clothes from the armoire. Everything I own is a hand-me down of Mom's from her own high school years. So, wool slacks and a knitted polo from the fifties. It would be nice to be modern, but beggars can't be choosers.

Billy shrugs and leaves the article ruminating on Barbara Holland's disappearance alone. Satisfied, I flee to the bathroom.

I spend most of the shower sitting on the floor, breathing, letting the heat roll over my shoulders and drip onto my legs and pour down my back, leeching the adrenaline from the bike ride and the fraught conversations from my veins. Bone-deep weariness rolls in like a wave. My frantic thinking is swallowed up by it. The worries about Billy, and about Morell, and about school and how people are going to treat me, and being dumped by Jermaine and, as such, the whole of the newspaper club, and about Tyler, they remain, just quieter and less immediate. They become deep water currents, same as my fear of my parents returning, of my brother reappearing. I don't know why I fear it, only that I do.

Sometimes it's easier to believe they're dead. They might as well be, if it wasn't for Mr Smith bringing the weekly groceries and the lights staying on when I don't pay for electricity. And those reminders keep the fear very much alive.

“Done!” Billy shouts at the bathroom door on his way past, stomping down the stairs in those heavy boots of his. It jerks me into action.

By the time I’m out, Billy’s already torn down all the unnecessary articles with much more speed than I could have used. There are rips in the wallpaper from rough handling of resilient scotch tape. I could care less. Tossing my gross biking clothes in the hamper by my door, I grin. The Wall is no more. My walls are *green*. Hallelujah!

For a moment, I simply absorb the unshackling of Jermaine Clutha and his increasingly bad friendship.

Then my stomach growls.

Soon. First, to attend to the few pages left over from the purge. It takes a few minutes to pull them down without destroying the articles and the photos. From what I remember of The Wall – and I remember a lot – he’s managed to leave every single pertinent paper, even those that just vaguely reference my topics to keep. It’s oddly heart-warming. Once I have them all in a stack on my desk, I try to recall *what* I was thinking about on the bike ride home, between worrying about Billy and The Wall. If I don’t do this now, I’m in danger of forgetting.

First question: What happened to Benny Hammond?

When his suicide was announced, the prevailing comment around town was, “Benny? Benny’s Burger’s Benny? He wouldn’t do that.”

See, I understand the number of secrets a person can hold and yet appear genuine to those around them. Church is a good learning ground for such things, even if it shouldn’t be.

Benny Hammond was different. He was gruff, strong, and didn’t suffer fools, much like Chief Hopper. He was also incurably honest and when you heard him despairing over farmers who’d offed themselves during a bad season, you knew he meant it. He was of the ‘toughen up, life works out’ variety.

I’d also known him since I was born. Benny Hammond was not a devout man, but he could be counted on for church working bees.

He'd rock up with a barbeque and five dozen meat patties and burger buns and enough bacon to stop your heart. He'd spend the day making people laugh, clouting the kids who tried sneaking an extra patty, forcing the skinny boys to take a second helping. He was everyone's favourite uncle. With no care for getting married, his burger store was his baby and his world. Benny Hammond loved serving people and people loved him.

Suicide and Benny Hammond feels wrong on a fundamental level.

The article detailing his death says a gunshot to the head. A friend of his was questioned by the police and by the local paper. The paper at the time declared much of the interview redacted by the police due to details pertinent to an ongoing investigation.

At the time of Benny's 'suicide', there was only one ongoing investigation in Hawkins. Which leads to Question Two: What did the disappearance of Will Byers have to do with the death of Benny Hammond?

I take a sheet of paper from my drawer and a red felt pen and write: BENNY HAMMOND SUICIDE? That and the article are taped above the desk.

Next: BARBARA HOLLAND CHEMICAL LEAK? Her article goes with it, a foot to the right.

For good measure, I add WILL BYERS DISAPPEARANCE? and BOB NEWBY ANIMALS? The very idea that a man whose most extreme sport was fishing would be in a position to be attacked by wolves is too far-fetched. HAWKINS LAB gets a cluster on its own, next to Barb.

I circle a little number one on Benny's paper. That will be my first stop. I'll work my way up to Will Byers' Lazarus episode.

It feels good to be doing what *I* want for a change. Last year Jermaine decided he was going to investigate Will and Barb's disappearances alone, without any help from us. He wanted full credit. He didn't get anywhere and gave up as soon as Will reappeared. He declared that Barb must have done a runner because she was unpopular and left it at that.

He is, in some ways, a terrible journalist. He never follows stories unless he can see them heading in a direction he wants, which is the opposite to what we've been taught by our journalism teacher.

Journalism class. Class. School.

"Tomorrow is going to be fun," I grumble, dropping into a chair at the kitchen table. Discarded articles burn to ash in the fireplace. Billy's found the sandwiches I made yesterday and heaped them onto a blue ceramic plate. They were meant for this week's lunches.

I take one off the top and bite into ham, tomato, lettuce, watercress, with dollops of mayonnaise on rye bread. Perfection. It's my favourite, after all.

"I have to go home," says Billy. "Got to drive my step-sister to school in the morning."

I swallow. "Oh. Yeah, 'course. We can meet in the parking lot after school and head here?"

He nods and bites into another sandwich. He's eaten *four* already.

"We'll start with the downstairs rooms," I say. "Clearing them out, breaking up the furniture, cleaning, stripping the wallpaper, that sort of thing."

"Ever think of just setting the place on fire and being done with it?"

"Try explaining that to Mom and Dad," I mutter.

"They really skipped out on you, huh?" He leans back, crossing his arms. He is handsome. The thick eyebrows, the blue eyes ringed with dark eyelashes, the curly blonde hair that he keeps so perfect. The dense muscles in his forearms that show through my father's leather jacket. I can see why some of the girls at school have their sights set on him. "How'd you manage that?" he probes, and the curiosity sounds genuine.

I swallow, shrug. "Dunno. Why don't you find them and ask?" I'm too tired to make light of being abandoned. "I pretend they died somewhere in the Rockies while checking out a historic hotel and no

one bothered to tell me.”

“And your brother?”

“East Coast. Accountancy scholarship at Harvard.”

He examines me while I keep chewing at my sandwich, then gets to his feet. “I’m off. I’ll see you tomorrow, Strange.” He walks out of the kitchen with the smooth control of a cat. I wonder if he practices that walk in a mirror or if he was born with it. Moments later, the Camaro roars away.

Loneliness, an abstract, largely ignored sensation that dwells in the closed-off section of my brain, amongst questions like ‘why did God let them leave’ and the lost dreams of my childhood, suddenly stings. Painfully. A stab below the sternum, in my solar plexus. The loss of companionship I never had, of life half-lived, of merely surviving through the days, never flourishing, never allowed to thrive, it builds and builds and builds, and there’s nothing to soothe it because it’s only my voice in this giant empty house now and this silence has never been so loud.

It is not good for man to be alone, said the Lord in Genesis 2:18.

Then why have you made me alone, Lord? Where is my companion you said you would make?

My appetite is gone – just as well, he’s eaten all the other sandwiches – so I put the plates in the sink and open the kitchen window to let out the stench of Billy’s cigarettes.

Exhaustion, soul-deep, makes me slow. I haven’t felt this way in a long, long time. I was twelve when Kato left, eight when my parents went to visit a hotel and never came home. Too young to understand how my future and identity were being shaped into something shrivelled, something small and quiet, so, so quiet. Too isolated in my early childhood to really feel the pain of their going beyond the burning of my hand on the kitchen poker because no one had taught me how to build a fire.

I bite the second-to-last bullet of the day. The last will be trying to

fall asleep.

The clock in the hall chimes one. Time to call the station.

Flo picks up.

“Is the Chief there?” I ask.

“He doesn’t come in on Sundays. He said to give you his number.” She rattles off the string of digits. I memorise it, thank her, and, repeating it to myself, dial.

On the fifth ring, Hopper says, “Yeah?” in a tone laced with laughter.

I try to bash through the despondency. “Hey, Chief. What are you up to?”

“Watching TV.” He covers the mouthpiece and, muffled, shouts, “Hey, no horror, all right?” A shout comes back at him that I can’t decipher. “So, how’d he do?” he asks me.

“Fine. He helped me strip wallpaper.”

“He didn’t try anything?”

I remember the glare, the justified anger, the fist. “Nothing. He’s gone home for the night.”

Hopper hums. “We’ve sent Morell back where he came from. He’s restrained in an ambulance on his way to Indianapolis as we speak.” There’s more noise in the background and Hopper yelps, laughs, and whoever is with him giggles hysterically. It sounds like a young girl. She could be to do with those adoption papers . . .

My train of thought is broken by a crash on his end. “Hey, I gotta go. Remember to check in tomorrow.”

And he hangs up and I stare at the handset. My eyes are burning to stay open. W.J. Morell watches me as I start to shiver, watches as I lock the front door, and make sure the downstairs bathroom is empty, and mocks me as I trudge upstairs with accusations of paranoia.

“Like you can judge,” I mumble as I shuck off my shoes and slip into my cocoon of blankets.

God help me, I pray. I don’t fall asleep for a very long time.

3. Welcome to the Jungle

Hawkins High is a piece of Twilight Zone trash. Fractured asphalt spans the gaps between brown patches of grass and dead trees and old block buildings, and he wishes he was anywhere but here. The senior high school building itself is nestled at the bottom of an incline, forcing teens to stumble into its gaping maw. Morning light splashes onto flat rubber roofs and growths of ventilators and heating units. The world is uniformly pale. He wishes he was in Cali. He misses his home more than he can say. He misses his streets that he knew like the back of his hand, the people he'd known forever, even if they were disloyal bastards and out to get their own way but, hey, wasn't that the way of the world?

He misses simply being there, that place where he had his mother and his dreams and his happiness. And though those things are gone, at least he could remember them. Out here, the memories grow fuzzier by the day. Disconnected, untethered, lost . . . His foundation is gone. Billy wakes up these days and isn't sure who he is. Perhaps that's why he attacked Steve Harrington, even as he knew what trouble it would get him in.

"Hey, did you really save her life?" Max asks suddenly.

Billy rolls his eyes, though it's a token gesture. He is not focused on his annoyance at his step-sister right then.

"Come on," she pesters, "did you?"

"I took him out because he came at me," he says absent-mindedly. He sees her. She's walking by the school football team logo, painted on the cinderblocks of the front building, a snarling tiger. She looks like she's slept in her clothes. A scarf is wrapped tight around her neck.

She is the first thing to remind him of home here. That's why he's interested. That's all.

"Oh," says Max.

"What do you care, anyway?" he snaps, suddenly irritated. That great

bear of a lineman, Tyler Matheson, has struck up a conversation with Asher and is standing close, real close.

"I was going to say I thought it was cool!" Max snaps back. "Geez. I'm going to the arcade after school."

He touches the side of his face, the stinging cut on his cheekbone from Neil's welcome home present. Congrats, son, on getting community service within a month of arriving in the new town and failing, again, to be a responsible big brother. Thanks, Dad, love you too.

It was Susan's ring that split his skin.

"I can't give you a ride," he mutters.

Max purses her lips. He can see her sullenly watching him out the corner of his eye. "I know," she spits. "And I don't need rides in the morning either. I'm going to tell your dad I can bus like everyone else. Then you don't have to bother with me."

Billy whirls around but she's already out of the Camaro and pushing up the slope on her new skateboard, the one he replaced when his father heard what he'd done. She rolls along in front of the elementary school, preferring to skate amongst the school buses than the senior cars. His ringed finger taps on the steering wheel. Brat. What does she think she's up to? She *never* confronts Neil, knows better than to try. Billy's the one with that privilege. He should nip this idiotic plan in the bud, before it gets one or both of them in trouble. He's in enough trouble as it is already.

She disappears around the corner to the Middle School entrance.

He steps out of the car and feels the eyes on him. Carol, Tommy's girlfriend, reclines on her friend's red convertible. Chewing gum, red hair ablaze in the meagre sunlight. She probably thinks she's attractive. Normally, she and her puppets, in their pastel bomber jackets and knitted sweaters and matching hairstyles, stare at him like he's a slab of meat. Today, they hold the air of a cut-off conversation and curiosity glitters in their eyes.

“Hi, Billy,” Carol calls. She smiles, salaciously, as if she can hold a candle to the Californian natives who exist in sunshine and fun and bikinis. “I hear you’re a hero.” So it begins.

Carol Perkins. A fickle sycophant if he ever saw one. He knows the type. She and Tommy Hagan were Steve Harrington’s advisors and cronies before his fall from grace. Now they’re trying to be his and the moment he loses even a fraction of his reputation, they’ll split and leave a raft of vitriol in their wake, like they did to Harrington, turning him into a social pariah within a week.

It comes with the territory, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t bloody annoying, and he’s getting more and more fed up with the whole tedious game of it. They won’t even succeed. It takes a lot more than two bitter farmers’ kids to crush Billy Hargrove.

In front of the snarling tiger, Matheson sweeps Asher into a hug that swallows her whole body. She pats his back, retracts quickly, and the two of them say goodbyes and part ways, him for the rugged field behind the school, she for wherever she hides and has avoided his notice until now. Billy’s not the only person who’s watched the exchange – most of the kids in the parking lot are staring and whispering and turning the horror of two fellow-students being murdered into that week’s social topic.

Matheson pauses at the alley that will take him to the field. His gaze tracks across the lot and finds Billy. Pauses. Then he raises a hand, gives Billy a close-lipped smile, and nods. They’ve never interacted before now. Matheson was never on Billy’s radar. He spent more time with his two friends, travelling all over Indiana on countless weekend road trips whenever they got the chance, hiking up the hills around Hawkins, swimming in the quarry. The three of them were well-liked and untouchable because, despite being jocks, they never tried to be popular. They didn’t bother with the seething whirlpool of high school drama. Since Matheson and his friends were no threat to Billy’s quick ascension to the top of the school, Billy let them be, and pretended he wasn’t jealous of them and their escape from the stupid farce of it all.

Knowing he’s being stared at by Carol Cooper and her cronies, and in that moment hating them for being part of the world he’s feeling

trapped by, he returns Matheson's nod and crosses the parking lot without a single nod to the girls.

Billy's got shop first thing, thank God. It's the closest to solitude this place has. Just a bunch of non-academic kids and stoners and the roar of heavy machinery ripping into metal and wood. He might try welding today. See if anyone wants talk to him while he's holding a blowtorch.

School is school. Wide, uninspiring corridors lined in green, painful fluorescent lights, bathrooms in which one stall is always out of order and the rest are covered in spiteful commentary. The teachers try to make their classrooms interesting and inevitably fail in the face of millennia-old teenage boredom. Normal, routine, dull.

Except today I am an A-lister in the rumour mill. As opposed to my usual background status, this Monday I am Tyler Matheson's rescuer – he's a good hugger, that boy – and Billy Hargrove's damsel in distress and people want to know about Hawkins College and the case of the disappearing bodies and why I was there and why was *Hargrove* there and what did Morell do to you? Why are you wearing a scarf inside? Are you and Hargrove together?

Joe and Mikey are *dead*. What is wrong with their priorities?

They hiss at me during class, in the bathrooms, in the hallways. I try answering at first and when they aren't satisfied, I give up and avoid public places. Lunch is spent in the library, head down, working on an AP English assignment, because I have no lunch to eat – thanks, Billy – and my homeroom is a no-go zone because it's also the journalism classroom where the newspaper club meets daily.

That stings the most, in some ways. I have friends in the newspaper club, people I've known all through high school. Not hang-out-after-school friends, but good-banter and follow-up-stories-together and

swap-books friends. The newspaper club was a safe community for me, even if Jermaine Clutha ruled it with an impatient fist and micro-managing, with me bearing the brunt because of my dubious distinction as ‘best friend.’

On second thoughts, I’m glad I’m not there. Gah. How was I friends with him for so long?

At least that’s one long-term problem somewhat solved – I’ve got graduation and Yale and my personal hunch that my parents will appear on the day I am about to leave Hawkins and trap me here, housekeeper of W.J.’s mansion forever.

Also, I’m being haunted.

In the middle of AP English, Mrs O’Connell expounds on Daisy Buchanan’s superficial charm and the evils of money, and I realise I’ve spent the last thirty seconds remembering Morell screaming into my face, *Build, BUILD, He wants me to build!*

In Chem, the equations swim in my vision, replaced with the pool – the soupy air, the black moss squelching underfoot, numbers shining in torchlight, twelve and three – until Mr Clayton barks my name a third time.

Worst is AP World History when chills break out over my shoulders and down my back and arms and I *know* he’s behind me, he’s there, he’s going to wrap those bony hands around my throat again and –

“Strange!”

I start, panting, terrified. The whole class stares, headed by our history teacher. He crosses his arms, unamused. I swallow and croak out, “Yes, Mr Ross?”

“Something you’d like to share with the class?”

“Oh, no, sorry.”

“The bodice ripper you read last night won’t help you pass history, Miss Strange.”

A chortle ripples through the students and I nod, thin-lipped and frustrated.

Get it out of my head, Lord, I beg of you. Until the end of the school, please.

The prayer works, hallelujah. The bell rings, the period ends, and biology passes without a hitch.

Then fifth period rolls around and the remembered fear of Morell takes a backseat to a more immediate and awkward problem.

Journalism. Jermaine's desk is next to mine.

I pause outside the classroom door to try and gather the meagre strength I have left. There's a lull in the conversation in the corridor and I can hear some early arrivals talking inside. Geoffrey, Samantha, Greta. Always first, those three. They have social sciences just across the hall for fourth period. They're all in the newspaper club too, three of the seven senior students.

"- So you gonna quit?" asks Samantha.

"Probably," Greta replies. "I don't want to be in Jermaine's firing line."

"I feel bad," this is Geoffrey. "We always let Ash take the brunt of his crazy. Without her, there's no buffer."

"You should have been at the meeting today," says Greta. "It was awful. He's really angry about not being the first to hear about what happened to Tyler and Joe and Mikey. I don't think any of the freshers are going to stay another week."

"Neither am I," Samantha drawls. Then, because it has to be said, "I'm not staying in Hawkins after graduation either. The whole town's gone mad."

There's a pause that encompasses what was once stunned disbelief and is now resigned confusion, that this sleepy farming community could be plagued with bizarre happenings that shouldn't occur outside of New York or L.A.. The places where the real whackos live.

It's an established feeling. Mikey and Joe's deaths fit into it easily and are accepted, mourned, and compartmentalised as *one of those things*. Greta sighs and moves on. "It won't be the same without Ash," she says. "She's nice. I'm glad they're not friends anymore, though. Jermaine's horrible. She deserves better."

"Like Billy Hargrove?" says Geoffrey slyly.

"Well, he's better looking, at least," Samantha allows. Greta laughs, and the other two join in, and that's when I'm accosted by Jermaine Clutha.

"Asher," he says, emerging from the river of students to stop in front of me. He's wearing a bowtie. How did I not realise what a prick he is before now?

My mind threatens to blank on me. The stupidity of the bowtie brings a surge of scornful adrenaline instead. I quickly squash it. Fighting fire with fire won't help this situation. I want this dealt with and over, not made into some sort of long-term feud. "Jermaine," I greet as calmly as possible.

His eyes narrow. "I need the articles. Where are they? Why didn't you bring them at lunch?"

"Sorry." And I throw Billy under the bus. "Billy burnt them when he found the articles about himself."

"Excuse me?" He has this look in his eye, the one that means a strategy is forming in his analytical little mind, one that will find every known weakness in the victim to exploit and manipulate until he gets what he wants because nothing is going to stand in the way of him and Harvard. I promise myself I won't give in this time.

"Asher, Jermaine?" An angel in an old high school letterman jacket from 1972 and jeans appears. Miss Davidson furrows her delicate brow at us. "What are you doing standing out here? In you go, in you go, class starts in two minutes." Jermaine and I are ushered into the classroom that used to be my safest haven in the entire school and towards our desks in the second row and Jermaine sits at his, thumping down his binder and ignoring me, while I . . .

Frown.

Geoffrey is sitting at my desk. He grins and nods towards his desk, next to Greta, two along and in the front row from where I won't be able to see Jermaine. Greta pats the laminated chair, welcoming me over. Samantha sits behind her, next to Geoffrey.

Here, I'm insulated from Jermaine. I can't even tell if he's watching me. Probably not. Jermaine is of the ilk who will toss away a problem if there's no easy way to solve it and move on to the next Way To Get Into Harvard, even if it means tossing away decade-old friendships. Loyalty, empathy, integrity, these words do not describe Jermaine Clutha.

Miss Davidson watches this performance with the interested air of a teacher who knows her students better than most teachers bother to – she is, after all, the newspaper club supervisor and no doubt noted my absence at lunch and was given some excuse by Jermaine. Then she smiles to herself and draws a cartoon turkey on the chalkboard and today's pun – *Let's Get Basted*.

I love this class.

.

"Asher, a minute, please?"

"I'll be back for homeroom," I say. "I'm just going to the bathroom."

"It will only take a moment."

I stand before her desk, journalism binder in hand and ready to toss into my locker on my way to the bathroom. She's lovely, Miss Davidson is. Young and alive and excited about her students' learning, searching out the gifts in all of them and stoking them into flame. Having her as a homeroom teacher for the past three years has been a godsend – even better because I don't have to change classes between fifth and sixth periods this year.

She props her elbows on her messy desk, amongst papers and pens and the little origami cranes she makes while we're talking over article ideas. She leans forward. "How are you?"

I blink. "Okay."

"Really? After this weekend, I thought you might take a few days off to . . ."

I shake my head. "No, really, I'm okay." *I'm not, but I'm not about to have this conversation here.*

Miss Davidson, bless her heart, senses this and lets me go with a simple, "If you ever need to talk, I'm here."

"Thanks, Miss Davidson."

In the corridor, I have a sudden premonition of Principal Murphy asking to see me. Please no. We've already done our semesterly meeting to talk about life on the prairie and how I'm surviving and my grades and aspirations and ask enough questions to ascertain whether or not I've lost my mind and am about to off myself in my attic. We're not scheduled for another Deep and Meaningful for another two months!

I shudder at my locker, throw my binder in, shovel my day's homework in my backpack, and keep going to the bathroom. Homeroom and then I'm home free. With Billy. Which is somehow the least exciting thing of my day.

Homeroom and freedom. Homeroom and freedom. Homeroom and – oh, wait, I need to find Earl Matlock. He might be able to shed some light on this. It's a longshot, but everyone knows he gave a statement to the police about it and it's not like Hopper's going to give me the reports from his investigation. Mr Wallace might know where he is. Hopefully Billy won't be too annoyed if we take a detour on the way home . . .

"Hey, Asher."

Carol, Vicki, and Tina leaning on the walls either side of the girls' bathroom door. Carol, Vicki, and Tina are the so-called popular crowd, Carol especially acting as gatekeeper for any enterprising

student wanting to move up the social ladder. Until today, we have never spoken.

This year, the senior journalism class is helping the understaffed yearbook committee with their more routine tasks. Our job last week was to compile the profile slips filled in by the high school students during Tuesday's homeroom. Career goals, favourite subject, what they do when not studying, and a host of other things that will change the moment we get out of high school.

Carol: Judge; none of them; 'you wish you knew.'

Vicki: Aerobics instructor; geometry ('it's got the best view of the boy's locker room'); working on her tan.

Tina: Next Tina Turner ('I know I'm not black, but I've got the hair'); music; dance lessons at *Sergio's Dynamic Dance Studio*.

Billy: 'To be the best, baddest dude alive'; lunch; 'none of your business.' Billy's hobbies also include 'lifting weights, working on my car, rocking out.' Extracurricular activities: Basketball. Favourite film: *A Clockwork Orange*.

"Hi," I say, gripping the straps of my backpack.

Carol pushes off the wall in one languid movement and slouches in front of me, all big red hair and chewing gum and studied insolence that can make a teacher lose it ten minutes into class. "So, you and Billy, huh?" she says.

"What about it?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Nothing. Just wondering what a dyke's gotta do to get him to stay the night." *Chew, chew, chew*, her friends smirking, looking me up and down, and last week I might have balked at this, might have crumpled under their combined disdain.

It's not last week. And knowing that she's been screwing Tommy H since she was twelve gives me courage in the face of her misogyny-driven hypocrisy.

"I'm not a dyke," I say, and before she can sneer or pop a bubble or

whatever she does to girls she has decided to hate, I pull off my scarf and show the livid purple bruises at my throat. All three girls' eyes widen. Carol stops chewing. Eight skeletal finger marks, two crossing lines for the thumbs, picked out in royal purple and burst-capillary red and deep navy. "I didn't ask him to stay. Chief Hopper did. All I had to do was almost die."

In their silence, the last of the doors in the social sciences corridor open and close and the bell peals for the start of homeroom and teachers call for silence. We're alone. Every word we say echoes in the icebox hallway.

"You probably got that when . . ." Vicki murmurs, then trails off, sickly implying.

"Billy's hands don't look like this." I stay calm and quiet and polite, which seems to upset Carol more than if I had lashed out. She pops her bubble.

"I bet you are that kind of slut," she draws. "Your big brother ditched you as soon as he could, didn't he? What's your problem? You got whips hanging in your bedroom or something?" *Chew, chew, chew, POP* again.

I smile. "Sorry to disappoint. My house is empty. You can ask Billy if you like. He might even compare his hands to these," I point at the bruises, "if you ask nicely."

Referencing Billy is becoming some sort of magic spell. It stops people in their tracks, like they're fearful he might appear over my shoulder and dare them to question him as they're questioning me. Vicki and Tina share a hesitant glance behind Carol's back. Carol has stationed herself in front of the bathroom door, which is the most upsetting part of this cliché. My bladder is screaming.

"-get Bacliff or what?" Carol whips around to see her boyfriend turning the corner of the corridor, hovering at a leather-clad shoulder, freckled face alight with morbid glee.

He's wearing my father's jacket still. It's going to stink of cigarette smoke if I ever get it back. How do you even wash leather clothes?

Vicki and Tina straighten, automatically shifting to accentuate their curves, these little smiles stealing over their lips, and any sign of the disgust they hold for me disappears. Ah. Good to know where I stand in their priorities.

“Tommy,” Carol calls, waving, though how could he have missed her? He grins, slaps Billy’s shoulder, and bounds towards his girlfriend to attack her mouth. I grimace and back up to escape and end up shoulder to shoulder with the man himself.

“Afternoon,” I greet.

His eyes are on my neck. “Put your scarf back on,” he says. “Otherwise someone’s going to send you to a hospital.”

“Right.” I secure the wool around my throat at the same time Tommy and Carol come up for air. Vicki and Tina have scuttled to one side, though they linger instead of going to homeroom.

Tommy fixes me with an assessing look and a smirk, his arm slung over his girlfriend’s shoulders. “Hi, Strange, how’s it going?”

“We’ve discovered little Asher’s secret,” Carol sings to him.

“Oh yeah?”

“Turns out she likes it *rough*.”

His smirk turns wolfish. “Does she now? I guess *she* gave you that, right?”

Billy has a fresh cut on his cheekbone, under which a bruise is blooming. It wasn’t there when he left yesterday. The bruise has the vague shape of a handprint and I have a certainty as to where it came from. My lips thin.

“It was from the psycho on Saturday,” says Billy. “Same with her neck, so you can shut up about it.”

I glance at him. *Huh?*

“Yeah, sure, man. You won’t hear a word from me.” Tommy H winks.

Carol giggles. Billy's expression goes blank.

Oh dear.

I've never been one for physical violence except in extreme circumstances. Right now, I can see how this feels like one. Some people just don't *listen*.

I wonder what's broken inside them, what turned them into these spiteful creatures, grinning and smirking and unsatisfied unless they make someone else as miserable as they are. I'm not about to let them win this time. They can't do anything to me, not really, not when I don't have a reputation to lose because I never bothered to cultivate one, not when I'm already the creepy girl on the prairie, not when my friends, few as they may be, know me through class and newspaper club and not through some bogus attempt to 'fit in,' which I was never going to anyway.

I have church, I have journalism, I have books and the prairie and God. I don't need the approval of Tommy Hagan and Carol Perkins. They can't hurt me.

But they can hurt Billy by baiting him, and from the gleam in their eyes, they know it too. It doesn't matter that they're meant to be friends. They're just happy as long as someone else isn't.

Billy clenches his fist. Out the corner of my eye, the journalism classroom door opens. I grab Billy's wrist before he raises his arm, and call, "Miss Davidson!"

"Asher?" My homeroom and journalism teacher approaches. Behind her, Geoffrey, Samantha, and Greta stick their heads around the doorframe to watch.

Tina suddenly looks at her watch, mutters, "Oh, is that the time?" and drags Vicki down the hall and away before Miss Davidson can stop them. Tommy H and Carol, too stupid to know when they should quit, stick around.

"What's going on?" Miss Davidson asks.

"Sorry, Miss," I say before Tommy and Carol can start spouting lies,

“can I go home?”

Miss Davidson eyes Tommy and Carol. “Are you okay?” she asks me.

“No, not really.” Time for a bit of sincerity. “Today’s been a bit much. To be honest, I probably should have taken the day off. Do you mind if I go home now?”

“School is over in forty minutes,” says Miss Davidson.

“I really don’t want to be around a bunch of people,” I insist, and to my horror I feel tears start to prick, hot and stinging. Darn it, not that much sincerity!

It works, though. “Oh, of *course*,” says my teacher. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Miss. And can Billy come to? He’s my ride home. Chief Hopper, uh, ordered it.” I try to laugh to distract from my reddening eyes and the laugh ends up sounding more like a sob so I shut up.

“Yes, yes, go on. I’ll let your teacher know, Billy.”

“Thanks, Miss,” I repeat. Tugging on Billy’s wrist, we leave Carol and Tommy with Miss Davidson, who I know disapproves of them and will give them detention for being out of class without a hall pass. I smile, sniff, then gasp and suddenly duck down another corridor lined with Battle of the Bands posters and Thanksgiving club meets just before the main doors to the parking lot.

“Hey! Where’re you going?” Billy calls.

“Bathroom! Meet you at the car!”

.

Max hears the far-off rumble of the Camaro. No one else pays the slightest bit of attention, not even Lucas. He’s pretending not to be

asleep as Mrs McAllister drones on about algebra, writing up strings of letters and numbers and pretending it is math. So stupid. Who even uses this stuff?

Apart from Dustin.

To the rest of the class, the car's engine is just another car engine, one amongst the dozens that trawl through Hawkins. It's not to Max. It's Billy's and Billy is leaving early and Billy had that cut on his cheek this morning from the ring her mom gave his dad and Max is getting sick of it all – the violence, the not talking about it, the pretending its normal to have a step-dad who beats his son for not watching over his step-sister like some kind of mother bear, when she's *thirteen*, she doesn't need a full-time babysitter!

Most of all, she's sick of her mom being afraid all damn day. It's got to stop. She's been to Mike's house and Will's house and Lucas' house and Dustin's, and their parents are normal and nice and not violent and she wants it. She wants her mom to be happy. She wants Billy to stop being angry all the time.

In San Diego, she didn't have a hope of doing anything since Neil ruled the police department.

Here, in Hawkins, there's a very different sheriff in town, and Max rather likes him.

4. Reno Man

“I’m going to kill them,” says Billy around his cigarette. “Tomorrow. And Bacliff.”

She’s got the windows down and Billy’s hands are freezing. He refuses not to smoke. She refuses to get lung cancer. They’ve reached an icy compromise. Yet he prefers being here, with her, than with Carol and Tommy. Bastards. Making sick jokes at Asher’s expense, when they’re the real screw ups.

He sends her a sidelong glance. She’s checking something she’s written in a notebook, lips pursed, blonde hair everywhere, not showing the slightest hint of being cowed by Carol and Tommy. Billy hopes she stays that way. He hopes no one breaks her, like Neil broke Mom.

The child inside, the one with the smile and the laugh, thrills. He might have failed to save the queen, but why not save the princess instead?

Hell, this town is messing with my head.

The steel blue Camaro rumbles under a robin’s egg atmosphere, cruising up Cherry Lane. It’s a one-street kind of town. Depressed economy. Depressed people. Heads tucked into scarfs to hide dour expressions. Past the school and the arcade and coffee shops. Past Hawk Cinema. Past Radio Shack. Bare trees and dead leaves. In the pale sun, the world is cold and brittle and old. He hates to think how cold Asher’s house is going to be when they finish with this detour she’s forcing them on.

“In a few months you’ll never see them again, so what’s the point of getting into trouble over them now? Besides, they’re just lonely and miserable. We don’t need to sink to their level. There,” says Asher.

The Camaro curves into a space outside the Camping & Hunting store. “Wait here,” she says, and she leaps out and dashes inside. Billy immediately winds the windows up and turns on the heater.

Easy for you to say, he thinks. When you don't care what anyone thinks of you.

When you don't have to care about the pride of a Hargrove man.

He touches his cheek and scowls.

The pride of a Hargrove man is more trouble than it's worth most days.

Minutes later, when the heater is doing its job, she comes back outside. She's talking in earnest with a squat old codger in a green cap. Billy watches them, listening, and wishing he knew where they bought their clothes. She's wearing a green wool coat, he's decked out in a thick hunting jacket, and they aren't shivering.

"A kid?" she asks. "Boy or girl?"

"I thought it was a boy," says Matlock. "The cops wanted it to be Lonnie's boy."

"But you're not sure?"

"Well he turned up, didn't he? And he had all his hair. This kid had a shaved head and wore a hospital gown." Matlock has white hair and is far past his prime, smile lines around his eyes, a permanent farmer's tan around his neck.

"If it wasn't Will, who was it?"

"Couldn't tell you."

"Are you sure it was a boy?"

"I thought it was. Now, I'm not so sure. They were skinny and at that age they all look the same, don't they?"

"And you're certain it wasn't suicide?"

"Benny killing himself? It'd be like the sun stopping in the sky."

Ah, Billy thinks. That's what this is about.

They shake hands, Asher saying, "I'm sorry he's gone. He was a brilliant man and his burgers were the best in town."

"He'd've been glad to hear it. Figure out what happened to him, Miss Strange. Benny deserves the truth."

"I'll try my best."

Matlock waves and pulls a set of keys from his pocket that unlock the dusty red pick-up truck one park over from the Camaro. Asher watches him get in the cab, then suddenly shouts, "Wait, would you mind giving me a ride home?"

What? thinks Billy.

"Pardon?" says Matlock.

"I've left my bike at school. It couldn't fit in Billy's car." She gestures.

Matlock eyes the Camaro and its occupant, scoffs, and says, "Course it wouldn't. You should think about getting a proper vehicle, son. Come winter you're not going to be going anywhere." He reaches over and opens the passenger door.

"We'll meet you at the house," Asher says to Billy as she passes by the Camaro's hood. Billy nods, throws his car into reverse, and hightails it out of there. He tears down Cornwallis, blatantly breaking the speed limit, pushing fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty. By the time he's out of the town and in the trees, he's doubled the speed limit.

Not going anywhere, my ass.

He blasts through the trees onto the prairie, where the sun hangs low. It skips over the muhly grass and the goldenrods and bangs into the black side of the house. The abode is wrong out here, in every sense of the word, from the dark finish to the way it steps towards the sky like a Mayan pyramid, each floor smaller than the one below. Billy feels that familiar disquiet steal over him, the sense of unwelcome that haunted him yesterday.

Screw you too, he thinks. *I'm going to rip you apart from the inside out.* There has to be an axe somewhere around here. He's going to turn all

that ugly furniture into a funeral pyre, and burn the curtains and dust sheets while he's at it.

He rolls to a stop at the porch, next to a van that has a Smith the Grover logo painted on its doors, white on green. The local organic produce store, if he's not mistaken. A holdover from the three decades ago before supermarkets infiltrated middle America.

Figures Asher would get her groceries delivered. It's not like she can just walk into town and pick them up herself.

Billy jumps up the steps, pushes through into the sullen entrance hall, and follows the sounds of cupboards opening and paper bags crinkling in the kitchen. An elderly man potters around the green linoleum. He takes produce and wrapped meats and loaves of bread out of huge paper bags set on the kitchen table and puts them away with long-practiced ease.

Something smells delicious. Pie. Steak pie. It's coming from the big paper bag on the counter next to the sink.

"Hello," says the elderly man. He has wrinkles as deep as the Grand Canyon and pale, rheumy eyes. "You're young Mr Hargrove, aren't you?" Even his voice is creaky. The guy has to be ancient. Yet he moves with grace, showing no signs of strain when he puts away the glass milk bottles or when he bends to stack the cans into the bottom of the writing-desk-pantry. He has a frizz of brown hair and a permanent limp of the left leg and whistles *Amazing Grace* as he works.

"Billy," says Billy.

"Montgomery Smith," says Martin Smith.

Billy dithers, his mother and his father warring within him. His cheekbone still aches and each twinge of pain stokes that fire which Neil has so lovingly coaxed year after year.

But for the first time in year, his mother's nature wins. She's been getting stronger since Saturday.

Billy asks, "Do you need a hand?"

“Start the fire, why don’t you?” says Martin Smith. “It would be nice for Miss Asher to come home to a warm house for once.”

Billy leaves through the kitchen door and the three steps to the scrubby lawn that’s more dirt and weed than grass. So different from the manicured lawns in Cali. Here, the tallgrass rings the lawn, a natural fence to protect the washing line and the shed and the woodpile stacked against it. Nothing else, just the false waves of the tallgrass rippling out to a horizon of fences and corn fields.

He would have expected a chicken coop or a small vegetable plot or something, this isolated from town. But nope. It’s not so surprising, he supposes. What teenager without a car and without a family has the time to work on homesteading, on top of school and a bastard friend called Jermaine Clutha?

Bypassing the woodpile, Billy opens the shed. It protests, groaning on its hinges. Inside its secrets hide in shadows and spiders’ webs. A bike with huge tyres leans against an empty bench. A lawn mower squats in corner. Tools rust on their hooks. There’s a fair amount of hardware in here, including the axe he’s been searching for. It’s heavy and comfortable in his hands. He grins, drags the shed shut, and collects the firewood. By the time Asher and Matlock turn up ten minutes later, the kitchen fire is roaring and Montgomery Smith is arraying his wife’s shortbread on a green ceramic plate and Billy’s piling up mouldy curtains and the drop sheets in the centre of the entrance hall. The axe waits by the chopping log out back.

Asher pauses at the threshold, accompanied by the crunching of Matlock reversing. “You’re already starting,” she says, astonished.

He raises an eyebrow and drops the last of the drop sheets. “It’s my job.”

“Oh, I know, it’s just . . .” She suddenly smiles, bright and brilliant and aching familiar. “Thank you.”

Quick to move past the lump forming in his throat, Billy says, “I’m going to break up the furniture too. Thought I’d start a bonfire.”

Asher looks like she wants to laugh. “Sure, sure, go ahead. Mr Smith

and I will have afternoon tea set up for you when you're done." She keeps smiling as she skirts the mound of cloth, stops at the sideboard. "Here, put this on the pyre."

The scowling face of W.J. Morell lands in the centre with a puff of mould and dust.

"Our conversation got me thinking. There was another kid I heard about a bit after Byers disappeared."

"Really?"

"Buddy of mine at Hunting and Camping mentioned it. Said he saw some girl in the forest late-November. She was wearing a dress of all things. Bare knees too. He said it looked like she'd been out there for a while. She jumped him, knocked him out, and took his hat and coat."

The potatoes cool, forgotten in their pot. "Did he report it?"

"I think so."

"So Hopper knows about her?"

"Has to."

"Did anything come of it?"

"Not that I know of."

Huh. A girl. That Hopper knows about. Hopper who had those adoption papers with his signature and that girl laughing at his house – the girl could be a niece, though. Except it's well known in town that Hopper doesn't talk to his family and his own daughter is long gone, so who was she? And who are these kids? Are they one in the same? What does Hopper know?

"What's his story?" asks Earl.

"Whose? Billy's? What do you mean?"

"He's got a few strings tied, if you get my meaning."

I hum in agreement. "Bad childhood."

"I've seen bad childhoods. His is something worse."

"It's not really my story to tell."

"I knew a boy like him. My wife married one." He chuckles, and I feel a life story coming on. "My dad used to beat me something black and blue. Back in my day, they all did but my pa, shoot, he was a master with the belt. Turned me out just like that kid – getting into fights, not caring one whit 'bout whatever was 'round the corner. Stopped caring about consequences."

My curiosity is piqued.

"What happened?"

"I found something I was good at, something to give me purpose and get me away from my old man. Until you find something you love you're stuck, see? That boy, he has no idea what he wants to do or be or even who he is. He's trapped in whatever lies his dad's been feeding him."

"What was the thing you were good at?"

"I'm a plumber, electrician, anything DIY. Home reno, I'm you're guy." He winks at me. "Nothing better than fixing up a home. They say a man's house is his castle." He slows at the gravel drive and leans forward in wonder. "Looks like you've already got one."

Castle . . . that's one way to describe it. Budget castle tower would be more apt. Thing is, I've never wanted to live in a castle. Castles are stuck in time, unchanging, built to keep other people out and the occupants in. There's nothing welcoming about a castle.

The bonfire, however, is. It burns a merry gold under the dark grey sky. The wind's picking up, swirling through the tallgrass, and bloated clouds are slipping down the northern hills to meet us. Storm's coming tonight. At least the rain means I don't have to worry

about Billy accidentally starting a wildfire on the prairie.

The plumbing rattles in the walls, water splashing down on the shower floor upstairs.

Full of Mrs Smith's pie and shortbread and satisfaction of a rather good day, all things considered, what with Jermaine and Tommy and Carol and the haunting of Morell, I finish washing the last of the plates, hand it to Montgomery Smith to dry, and pull the plug in the sink. My fridge and pantry are stocked, Billy's starting to destroy the remnants of W.J. Morell and my parents at a policeman's behest, and I have friends who aren't Jermaine Clutha.

Yes, all in all, a very good day.

"– that kid who crashed Big Buy and –"

"–Pardon? What kid?"

Mr Smith places the plate on the shelf above the food cupboard. "Around this time last year, a kid broke into Bradley's Big Buy, stole a bunch of waffles, and smashed the automatic doors. You didn't hear?"

"Surprisingly, no. What did the kid look like?"

Mr Smith strains his memory back. "Doug told me about it. It was a girl, I think. Blonde curls and pink dress were his words. Didn't say a thing, went about glowering and acting like a nutter. No one found her."

I stare at him. There was the kid at Benny's who definitely wasn't Will Byers, then the forest girl who Hopper knows about, as well as the girl who was at Hopper's last night. Now this girl in a dress – like the forest girl – stealing waffles at the same time Will was gone. "You don't say," I say slowly. "Thanks for everything. Are you getting the payments all right?"

"Like clockwork."

At least my parents are good for something.

Blonde girl in a pink dress rings a bell, of something similar around the same time Mr Smith is talking about. It's at the front of my mind, seen recently.

Absent-minded, I hug Mr Smith and wave him on his way out. It's right there and it has something to do with Will Byers too.

I dash up the hideous orange carpet. I toss my bag on my bed and go to the mosaic of questions and articles and pictures and . . . *there*. Around the Will Byers question.

Last year, November tenth, Hawkins' Middle held an assembly in remembrance of Will. Samuel, part of the newspaper club, had been sent to cover it. He was one of the best photographers on the team. He focused on Michael Wheeler and Co. when they eventually arrived, knowing them to be Will's closest friends.

He took several photos and gave the copies to me as part of the 'records keeper' role, though several of them didn't make it to print. Two of these catch my attention now. In one, Mike Wheeler leans forwards on the bleachers, gazing at two boys. Seated next to him, an unknown girl in a dress with wavy hair, does the same.

In the other, the two boys stand in a circle of middle schoolers and face down Mike and Co. and the girl. The angle is awkward, shot behind the front line, and provides mere glimpses of the tableau.

The back of a leg, pee soaking the pants.

Half of Mike Wheeler's astonished face.

The girl, staring at the peeing boy, the tiniest bit of blood pooling in her left nostril.

Something about the scene feels . . . off. Samuel mentioned in a whisper that Troy Baker seemed frozen at the time and, when questioned, random middle schoolers couldn't name the girl.

It might be a long shot, but tomorrow I'm going to pay Troy a visit. Then maybe Mike Wheeler.

And then, when I have enough evidence, Chief Hopper.

Lord, what is going on here?

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From the moment he first saw it, he's been avoiding it. He hasn't touched one in years, on purpose – it was just another reminder that she wasn't there. And his father would cuff him if he heard. *Hargrove men play baseball. Not piano.*

She taught him when Neil was at work. When he was older, she would hum while he played, creating harmonies as if plucking them out of the air as she cooked or cleaned or simply sat and listened and watched the rain and the storm on the other side of the windowpanes. It was a rare day that Billy would be inside instead of out on the waves. So, on those days he brought the waves with him. Rolling arpeggios and splashing melodies and the deep current of the chords. He weaved the sea out of notes and set it loose in their little apartment and it was just her and him and no Neil. It was almost as good as actually surfing.

The music room has huge windows facing the north hills and the eastern pine forest surrounding Hawkins. The sky is black through them, sucking up even the remnants of the sunset, and the tallgrass shudders and ripples as gusts blast against the house. A few spots of rain smack into the watery north-facing glass. The storm is coming. Billy watches it approach under the beam of the new light bulbs he put in the old chandelier.

It's a long room, the parlour and the dining room combined. This would have been the centre of entertainment. Who would come to W.J. Morell's house for entertainment, he can't even imagine.

At least W.J. Morell isn't hanging above the fireplace anymore. The room is almost entirely bare now. Billy stripped it well. He left the few landscapes that weren't hideous, and took the rest out to the steadily growing pyre. He removed all the furniture – apart from the massive couch which was too heavy for him to lift alone and he doubted Asher or elderly Montgomery Smith would have been any

help. It was patterned in pine trees and not as offensive as some of the other pieces he'd shattered with the axe. It stayed, facing the piano. That, and the piano stool. And the harp, of course. There's something sacrilegious, even for Billy, about burning a harp.

In the near-empty, and much nicer, music room, Billy sits on the piano stool. He lifts the fallboard. Ivory and ebony, smeared with the dust that sticks. A streak runs through it from when he played a glissando across the entire keyboard to check the pitch.

Which is perfect.

Don't be stupid, he thinks. Asher will hear.

So what? It's not like she's got anyone to tell.

Billy taps middle C, the most benign of all the notes, gets annoyed with himself for being a coward before the note has even stopped ringing, and starts to play. He brings the ocean to Hawkins.

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I'm humming.

Why am I humming?

I pause in re-reading the *Chicago Sun Times* article and listen. Below the groaning of the house and the howling of the wind and the cracking of sleety rain on the windowpanes, is music. Great, roiling, beautiful music.

What on earth?

Oh, that's just unfair, I think. As if being handsome and saving my life and fixing my house isn't enough, he has to play piano too?

Unable to help myself, I leave Barbara Holland's death-by-chemical-leak – which I still find suspicious and there is nothing linking it to random children turning up in Hawkins, or even Will Byers'

disappearance, but it all happened around the same time and coincidence doesn't exist in journalism – and tiptoe down the creaking stairs, drawn every onwards by the tidal motions of Billy's playing. At the top of the last flight of stairs, I sit down, and simply listen. The conjured waves sweep over me and wash away the strain of the last few days.

I start humming again, following Billy's lead. I have never seen the sea. Is it this wild, I wonder? This changeable and immense? Does it whisper softly in your ear one moment and then pound into your bones the next? Suddenly, I want to see it with an intensity I've never had before. Feel the spray I've read about, taste salt, look out at the endless horizon of the Atlantic or the Pacific and know that there are others out there, who speak in different voices and tongues, looking back. The freedom of ocean waves beckons.

It's intoxicating to have someone else's noise in this place, someone else's feelings. I hope it never ends.

The music stops with a slam, the fallboard falling.

The door to the music room slams open and Billy storms out, glances at me, and disappears into the wild night. The Camaro engine roars.

That expression . . . there was something untethered, in that expression. Something deadly.

I run to the phone.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this is late! I got busy over the past few days.

5. Juke Box Hero

What was he *thinking* playing that thing? Believing that he could be transported to California by the keys of the piano? That he might forget his life, hiding away on the prairie? That *she* is resurrected in Asher Strange?

Wake the hell up, Billy Hargrove. Life is not some fantasy. Neil is waiting, belt in hand. *That's* reality.

The Camaro bites into the gravel and ploughs through, leaving tracks of exposed dirt in his wake. Billy changes gear and tears out of there.

The house is soon hidden from view by tallgrass. Careening along the country road with the dry stalks whipping past, his rage builds and the word *coward* starts repeating in his head. A twist of the volume knob and a Van Halen guitar riff rips through the cab and through his own damn brain.

He winds down the window and howls at the setting sun.

Where to? He has no idea. He feels so unpredictable it surprises himself. It's electrifying. Billy is almost jittering in his seat as the thunder of the engine and the pulse of his heartbeat heightens his emotions to a fever pitch of excitement. Van Halen is screaming. He could do anything. He got to fight Steve Harrington and his band of losers this afternoon and everyone knows that the evening is when things get really interesting. The excitement bubbling out of him is intoxicating.

"I'm coming for you, Stevie boy," he murmurs and sudden hysterical laughter crashes out of him. The Camaro dives into the forest and the moonlight comes in shards through the naked trees. It ripples over the bonnet and into his eyes. Life tonight is perfect.

Until it isn't.

Because that's the Chief's truck parked across both lanes waiting for him.

Billy grins. Oh, hell yeah, this could be it. He could be done with the stupid town and his bastard dad and his new pet of a wife and Max . .

And Max.

Billy swears, yanks at the wheel, slams on the breaks. The Camaro whips around, tyres almost lifting from the ground, and an unholy screech fills the quiet forest as the car skids closer, closer, closer, oh *crap*, the Chief is leaning on the truck, Billy's gonna crush him –

The Camaro stops as if the hand of God smacked it out of motion. It rocks on its wheels and settles. Billy turns off the engine. The burning metal clicks as it cools.

The khaki mass of Chief Hopper swells in Billy's open window. The boy himself flexes and relaxes his white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel. His hands are cramping. Some of the cuts over the knuckles have opened and seep red.

"It's a nice night for a drive," Hopper comments. He doesn't look into the car. He lights a cigarette instead and stares at the trees. The waist of his heavy winter coat is three inches from Billy's ear.

Billy matches the inappropriate composure and slouches in the driver's seat. "Better in Cali."

"Probably right. Sometimes I wish it was warmer around here. It gets below minus twenty some years."

Well ain't that grand. Frickin' mid-west towns. The coldest it ever got in San Diego was forty-five and that was in January, not November. He's meant to be in t-shirts for another two months. At the moment a breeze slips through Strange's dad's leather jacket and goose bumps ripples over his arms.

"You got a reason to be out here, Chief, or were you missing me?" Billy drawls. The Chief chuckles.

"As much as I love your pretty face, I'm working right now. Your sister gave me a call." The Chief leans down and the twilight flashes in Hopper's eyes. Anger, smouldering, turns that usually bored face

into a criminal's nightmare. "If there's one thing I don't like about California, it's the crooked cops. You wanna help me take one down?"

I retreat to the kitchen, my place of busywork when the quiet becomes too much. Here there is the record player and the frying onions and the snap, crackle, pop of the kitchen fireplace.

He's gone again, like the snap of fingers, and the loneliness is back and worse than ever and all I can think is how much I don't want to be alone anymore.

How cruel, God, to bring Billy here if it's just to remind me of how alone I am. He will not stay, that is for certain, and so this month of his community service will end with me in a renovated house full of fresh reminders that no one stays, and I will try to drag back that veil of busywork and self-blinding to hide the jagged scar in my heart that's been ripped afresh by Your hand.

"Get a hold of yourself, Asher," I mutter. "It's not as bad as that. Besides, you're acting dependent, and there's *no way* Billy would stick around if you're this desperate. It's not healthy."

And what is healthy about this?

Right. Busywork. If it's a choice between sitting and pining versus working and pining, I'll take the latter. After all, it's not like there's anyone else around to do it for me.

There is bread enough for sandwiches, which I'm in dire need of after Billy's massacre, and I've been restocked with oatmeal and apples for breakfast. But what to have for dinner? I have no idea if Billy's coming back and Chief Hopper might come with him so I better make enough for three. And if there's leftovers I can have it tomorrow. There are mushrooms in the pantry. And Mr Smith left a slab of beef in the fridge and it would go wonderfully with mashed potatoes.

With gravy.

All the ingredients go on the kitchen table since the counter next to the sink is taken up by the microwave and bread box. Oh, the day when I can run from here and start anew in the city – the real city. New York, not Indianapolis. I'll be a writer, a reporter, whatever God wants me to do as long as it isn't in Hawkins, living under the roof my parents abandoned. I will go to jazz clubs and sit in cafes and stare at the glamorous as glossy and pristine as the magazines they inhabit and they will . . .

. . . The dreams slip from my fingers and drown in what feels like a becalmed ocean, gunmetal grey, conjured by Billy. But where he coaxed it into waves, I can only see a mirror showing nothing but the unhappiness I have lived with for as long as I can remember.

When I become poetic, it's usually a bad sign.

I reach for the repurposed icebox, a heavy rectangular cube meant for, well, ice. Its new use is much more helpful, especially in quelling my feelings.

On top of the icebox is Dad's old record player and inside are my favourites of his records. He collected them during the fifties and sixties, before meeting Mom at college. She studied history, him architecture. It was a match made in Heaven. I think he lost all taste for modern music when he met her. I remember growing up listening to Bach and Beethoven and Haydn and wishing for something else. It came in the form of a box found in the attic a week after Kato left.

Elvis, Chuck Berry, Roy Orbison, Bill Haley and Frank Sinatra have since helped me through a lot of cold, lonely nights, when the wind bashed at the boarded-up fireplaces and the nearest person felt further away than the moon. The female singers, Billie Holiday and Etta James, remain in the box now under my parents' bed. Couldn't tell you why, but I've always preferred the men. Perhaps they remind me of Kato. The whole protective 'big brother' vibe.

Then again, what sort of big brother ditches his twelve-year-old sister in a creepy mansion?

Scratch that idea. I just like guy singers.

In the middle of the collection is the well-handled Frank Sinatra '58 LP, *Come Fly With Me*. With great reverence, I place it on the platter and slide the stylus into the outermost groove. I twist a dial on the casing. The record spins, and with a hiss and a crackle, a jiving fanfare fills the kitchen and Frank's croon invites me to take to the skies.

I pretend I'm in church, on the stage, where no matter how tired and unhappy I am, I can put on a smile and believe for those four songs that I am cheerful. It's probably wrong. No one has taught me the alternative.

Forcing myself to sing along, I return to chopping onions and mushrooms and meat. My feet dance across the linoleum. I spin around the table and snatch a skillet off its hook and plonk it on the stove with a flourish. Butter in the pan and one by the one the ingredients. Water bubbles in a pot and I toss in the salt and, with more care, the potatoes. In a heavy-bottom casserole dish I brown the squares of meat on all sides and toss in the sautéed mushrooms and their friends and add a few cubes of frozen homemade beef stock. Soon it's simmering, and the kitchen smells heavenly. It's too bad I have to open the window, lest the steam encourages the ceiling to grow its own mushrooms.

With a pirouette and a cha-cha, I glide to the bread box and, in a heroic effort, attempt to think about this week's homework assignments. It lasts maybe a minute, and then the numbers three and twelve shine in the torchlight. The memory starts spinning out and it won't stop. Running through those dark halls, hearing Tyler screaming, knowing that even when I escape here, *he* will be waiting at home –

"Ah!" Blood beads from the shallow cut on my finger. I shove the digit against my lips before it can drip onto the bread slices. Plasters, plasters. I trot out of the kitchen, duck under the stairs, and enter the tiny tiled space where Morell hid. It barely fits the toilet and sink. On a shelf above the toilet next to the Tampax are the plasters. I fumble it open and manage to wrap one around my finger.

Note to self, don't have a traumatic memory when handling sharp objects.

Chicago swings through the entrance hall, and the ringing of the telephone joins in shrill dissonance.

The pale square of W.J. Morell's old hanging place is a new thing. I look at it while I pick up the phone, fascinated to see this house changed for the first time in years.

What else might change? What might this house become?

What will my parents say?

"Yes?" I say into the receiver.

"Want the good news?" says Hopper. His gruff voice is downright jolly, with a hint of bloodthirst.

". . . Yes?"

"Your boy Billy's all right."

I sigh in relief. "Oh, thank God."

"That's not the good news. You promise you won't tell a soul?"

Is he being conspiratorial? "Of course. I got kicked off the newspaper team and I live alone. Who'd I tell?"

"Don't you have a clique or whatever they call it these days?"

"Yes. We're called the pariah club. It's me and Steve Harrington."

"Cool it, kid," he deadpans. "Stand up is *my* weekend job."

"What's the good news?"

"We've got Neil Hargrove in custody."

“You wanna talk to him?”

Weirdly, Billy doesn't. He looks through the tiny glass pane in the wooden cell door. His father sits on the narrow metal bed. Lit by a bare, burning bulb in the centre of the room, he looks sallow and ill. His moustache is black and limp, his hair hanging over his forehead. The terrifying monster that is Neil Hargrove seems to have been drained away, leaving this pitiful man in its place. Billy always thought his father was a big man. But, after seeing Hopper drag him into the police station and shove him into a cell, Billy now sees that he's average at best. It was his voice, that glare, the sudden and unexpected violence, his unassailable right to do whatever he liked to his son, that made him such a terror.

Neil looks up and spots Billy in the window. The bitter, poisonous glare he gives his son hardens Billy's heart.

Pathetic, Billy thinks. When they brought him in, Billy was waiting in the entrance area, having driven to the station under the Chief's orders and told to *wait there or else*.

Upon seeing his son, Neil went rabid. “*You're listening to him? Don't believe anything he told you! The boy's mad!*” Hopper's lack of response made Neil turn on his son. “*I take care of you and this is how you repay me? You don't know how much trouble you're in. When I get out –*” Then Hopper had thrown him into his cell, locked the door, and clapped his hands together.

“What a piece of work,” he said with relish. “You wanna talk to him?”

Now, Billy gives his father the finger and turns his back on the cell. “No,” he tells Hopper, who might just be his hero, and last week he would have shot himself at the thought. “Let him rot.”

Hopper nods. “You're better off without him, kid. By the time he gets out, you'll be old enough to live on your own. And don't you worry 'bout Red. She's got her mom.”

Billy shoves past the big cop and heads down the tiny stub of a corridor, past Hopper's office, and into the entrance area of Hawkins Police Station. There is a long wooden bench out here that he collapses onto and closes his eyes. He breathes in his first, hesitant taste of freedom. It smells of stale coffee, cigarette smoke, and old carpet. It smells like Chief Hopper. And if anyone *except* Chief Hopper had his father in jail, he wouldn't believe he was free at all. He knows how abuse charges work in California. A slap on the wrist, a five-hundred dollar fine, and the abuser is back home and angrier than ever. Yeah, back in San Diego, he'd be in more trouble than ever right now.

Yet, for some reason, he trusts this Chief of Police. How could he not? Billy saw that deep, burning anger in the Chief's eyes when he suggested taking dear old Dad into custody. No way is Chief Hopper going to let Neil Hargrove go free. And Chief Hopper is the law around here. There are perks to small town America.

Billy grins.

He doesn't have to go home to a belt ever again.

Then the station door crashes open and there are two redheads in front of him. Ah, right. After having Neil arrested in their own home, Susan would have driven by the Wheeler's to pick up Max before coming here. The girl's got that stubborn, angry expression on her paling face. Lack of sun is washing her out fast, as it is him.

Underneath that scowl is a hint of glee.

"Mrs Hargrove," Hopper says, holding out a hand. Billy sits back to watch this unfold. Alice Weaver, the night secretary with the gossipy son, took his cigarettes when he came in earlier, something about a woman named Flo and her health magazines. She took Hopper's at the same time. An instant camaraderie formed between the two males, built on injured masculine pride and exasperation at women and their bizarre ideas but what's a guy to do? Women are the better half of humanity, after all, and life would be too damn depressing without their smiles and wiles and uncanny ability to make a room cleaner just by walking through the doorway.

Susan shakes Hopper's hand. "What's going to happen?" she asks, trying to stay calm. The last word wobbles a bit, though. She always was a passive one, drifting along in Neil's wake and never raising a hand to Billy's defence apart from a few, wobbling words of, 'Really, Neil, you don't have to . . .'

Billy's mom once picked up a plate and smashed it over Neil's head.

"I need to interview you," he replies. Not Maxine, of course. Because he and Maxine have already talked and she's the one who got his father thrown into jail and his freckle-faced brat of a step-sister is his unexpected saviour. She looks at Billy and winks. Billy winks back. They grin at each other, sharp-toothed and savage.

Susan is watching Hopper, wringing her hands. "Tonight?"

"Best to do it quick."

"Oh . . ." She glances at Billy, questioning.

Hopper answers for him, "He's given his statement."

Billy doesn't like talking to cops. That conversation, however, had been a good one.

"Does your dad beat you?"

"Yeah."

"When did it start?"

"Whole life. Beat Mom too."

"Anything else?"

"He's more corrupt than a cavity."

"Got proof?"

Little did his father know, he paid attention on those trips to the San Diego Police Department after his mom left. Over time, most of the trips became because of misdemeanours instead of after-school care.

He listened to the whispers, the running commentary on his father's indiscretions and beatings of incarcerated blacks. He knows how much had been covered up for Neil's sake – and it is a heck of a lot more than just Billy's beating of David Westley.

In Hopper's office, the police chief wrote down Billy Hargrove's statement, clapped Billy on the shoulder, and drove off in that beat-up khaki Chevy to arrest Billy's father for child abuse. It felt like a dream then. It still does.

A new future unrolls before of him. One where he and Maxine can sit silently beside each other and not be at each other's throats and there isn't a moustached maniac forcing them to hate each other. One where he talks to cops. One where Neil Hargrove isn't in control.

Billy closes his eyes and slumps against the wall and wonders when he's going to wake up.

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"Billy." Someone is shaking him. "Billy, wake up. We're going home."

It's Maxine. The hell is she doing waking him up? He's gonna break her fingers for coming into his room, the little –

He smells the coffee and smoke and old carpet and bolts upright. Max leaps back. Over her shoulder is the secretary's window into the station bullpen. Inside Hopper chats with one of the uniformed officers – the black one, Officer Powell if he's remembering correctly. The one who was there the night this whole Asher Strange thing started. He idly wonders what they've done with Morell. He wasn't in the cells when Billy was down there. Hopefully he's been shipped off to some max-security lunatic prison and will be stuck in a straitjacket for the rest of his life. Bloody psycho.

Susan is by the door, hands clasped, waiting. Her hair has deflated, her shirt is wrinkled, but she has a tentative smile on her face like she can't believe what is happening. Max doesn't even try to hide her

delight. They wait for him to come with them to their new, empty, Neil-free home. What will it be like, he wonders, to not stand between them and Neil's rage? Who are these two, when they're not another reason he's getting beaten?

There will be time to find out, later. Right now, the rug of his reality has been ripped away and he doesn't know what he's standing on anymore. He needs to be somewhere Neil Hargrove hasn't been. He needs distance and peace and time to figure out what the hell he is without his father. He doesn't want Neil haunting him from Max's shoulder or Susan's wedding ring.

He's also starving. Not far out of town, there's a full pantry with his name on it.

He shoves his hands in her father's jacket pockets.

"Billy?" says Susan as he brushes past.

"You go," he says quietly. "I'm out tonight."

"Oh." She, unlike Neil, knows when not to push. "Okay."

And because tonight is already bizarre, he offers up information without being forced. "I might be back for dinner tomorrow."

Out the door, not bothering to stop and say goodbye to the Chief. Billy gets into his car and is out of that carpark as quick as he can. Van Halen starts screaming again and he shuts it off, wanting the quiet for once. He drives as fast as he can, racing through the down, from third to fourth to fifth gear along the country road heading east. The small town businesses drop away, then it's houses set far back from the pavement. Then it's pine trees and the occasional winding drive branching off the main road. Jolting over the train tracks. Further, further, and *there*. The prairie opens up, a sudden shock to the system, and he's careening between the tallgrass towards that black monolith. Sleet scrapes across his windscreen. The porch light is on, shaking in the storm, and light blazes over the backyard from the kitchen. The time on his dash reads 10:10. He must have been asleep on that police bench for hours while Hopper went through the policy routine of *What To Do with the Wife of an Arrested Officer*. His

shoulder certainly feels like it.

The driveway is a surprise and he almost misses it, wrenching the wheel at last second. The tires skid, kicking up gravel before catching traction. In seconds he's upon the house.

He jumps out almost before the car's stopped moving. Raw, jagged wind rips through him, propelling him up the steps, raising his hand to the door and . . .

White scars lace across his knuckles. The jutting bones, the sliding tendons under their tanned covering, the pale blue lines that suck blood from fingers and send it back to the heart – he has seen these hands a thousand times before, fisted and flying towards his face, snatching at his shirt to slam him against a wall, wrapping thin brown leather around those tendons, the buckle left hanging . . .

I'll hurt her, like he did.

Billy's hands are his father's, and so is the rest of him. He is his father's creation. What was he thinking, walking into Asher Strange's life, dragging in his vices and violence without a thought? That's what Neil did. That's what drove his mother away.

A wrong word, a careless comment, anything, it could set him off and he'll fly at her like Neil used to, and he won't have the excuse of 'my father beats me' to rely on because it is his father *inside* him. He absorbed Neil like a second skin even as he raged against the man.

No matter that he hasn't hurt Asher yet. It's only a matter of time before he snaps. Proves the world right, that he's a screw-up, that he'll never change, and his future is an unchanging world of fights and birds and flunkies and not one ounce of meaning in any of it. Once, he welcomed the simple anarchy.

Now . . .

People don't change, though. And he's a Hargrove man, right down to the marrow of his bones. It's all he'll ever be.

No.

A smile made from love. Humming in harmony.

You are my son.

Blonde hair and green eyes and a heart of pure sunlight that he wanted to bask in all day long . . .

He made his choice long ago. It's time to make yours.

The door opens and the smell of casserole spills onto the porch. Billy's stomach growls.

Asher stands in the gap, dressed in a thick knitted sweater. She has tucked the ends of her pyjama pants into her socks and pulled her hair into a braid, fringe swept back by the tearing north wind. The sweater covers her from neck to wrist.

There's this look of surprised delight on her face. Confusion too, tension, but mostly relief. No one has ever looked at him that way before.

"Hi," she says. He nods slightly. Silence falls, the cold of outside and the warmth from the kitchen fire fighting for dominance at the threshold. In the awkwardness, Billy goes for a cigarette – only to find he doesn't have one. That secretary with the gossipy son – damn it, his father's arrest is going to be across the school by tomorrow lunchtime, won't it? – has them. Asher watches the aborted move.

What should he say? He can't explain why he left, can't explain the roaring of the caged, whipped animal inside, and he doesn't know if he won't leave again.

Then Asher opens the door wider. "Do you want to come inside? You'll freeze out there."

"Dad's been arrested," he says before he knows he's going to say it.

She nods. "Hopper called."

The sharp, wet cold slashes at Billy's back, his neck, and mere feet away is the warmth of the kitchen fire and casserole and a bedroom that Neil Hargrove has never invaded with his belt and his stone-

faced fury.

Asher bites her lip, glancing at the furious night behind him. "It's starting to snow," she murmurs, green eyes narrowed in annoyance. Off-handed, she tells him, "Biking in snow is a nightmare." It's said with no hint of insinuation, no attempt at manipulating, and that's why Billy drawls,

"I can give you a ride in the morning."

She stares. "Really?"

He shrugs. "Max has decided to ride the bus now." And, before he can lose his nerve, an eventuality that he's never considered possible until now, he slips past her into the house and heads towards the kitchen. "It'll be easier if I stay the night," he calls over his shoulder.

She laughs and shuts the door and he finds a spare blue bowl warm on top of the covered casserole dish. Waiting for him.

I know you'll make me proud, my darling.

6. The Hair

Asher gave him the key to her parents' rooms, though she refused to go into them herself. He couldn't blame her. There wasn't much to see, besides too much paisley and a gigantic bed that, by rights, should have been impossible to get up to the second floor. That thing needed a *crane* to move.

The only personal effects were in the wardrobes. No photos, no diaries, no letters hidden away in a locked drawer addressed to their daughter with the words *in case of our disappearance* written on the envelope. Just two wardrobes, filled with out-of-date clothing that had somehow avoided being moth food.

Billy took the black merino turtleneck and the navy coat and the old jeans that were just a smidge too long and had to be rolled at the cuff. He found that Mr Strange and he shared a shoe size, and thus could share the pair of brown leather winter boots that were almost a perfect fit. They were a sight better than his black ones for the acres of snow stretching across the prairie that morning.

Seeing the white upon waking had been a surprise. The storm blew out during the night and left a uniformly grey and dismal day in its wake. Twilight hangs in the air, making the drifting snow all but invisible as it falls and deepens on the roads and makes driving the Camaro that much harder.

Snow, real snow. Temperatures so cold that frozen water can linger on the ground without melting.

Midwesterners are mad.

At least Asher had oatmeal waiting for him when he went downstairs. A smile, a good morning, a crackling fire. It was so different to his normal life that he didn't speak for most of breakfast, too afraid to break the spell. He still hasn't come to terms with the fact that his 'normal' is gone forever. In fact, he's on edge. He woke up that dreary morning with the feeling of it all being too good to be true. Of his mother's memory not being enough to outweigh his father's influence and that sooner or later he's going to fall off this tightrope and

everyone will say *ah well, what could we expect with a father like that? He was a lost cause from the beginning* and that's that. He's in jail. His life is the same cycle of simple anarchy and no one will ever smile at him and spoon oatmeal into his bowl again.

How cruel, the universe, to show him the possibility of peace, while hanging the guillotine over his head – and it's his twitch that will send the blade falling.

Asher didn't say a word on the ride to school. She is too smart to not notice how he chain-smoked, fingers smacking against the wheel, biting back curses as the Camaro fishtailed. "I'll see you after school," she said in the parking lot, still smiling, and she left him to himself.

So he gathered himself and went to Shop class.

Ah, Shop class. At least some things never change.

Billy hangs up the coat amongst puffer vests and plaid jackets, then strips off the turtleneck too. Underneath, he has his wifebeater from Saturday that Asher washed. He takes down the last set of overalls, the ones hanging on the peg with his name above it.

Shop at Hawkins High is well known to be the home of the academically untalented and the delinquents. Ruled by Mr Shapiro, shop class *isn't* a seething hotbed of misbehaviour and goofing off. In fact, for the students who work here, it's a relief from the pain of sitting at a desk for hour after hour. Here, amongst the heavy machinery and the half-built cars with parts rescued from the dump and the concrete floors covered in sawdust and shards of metal, boys get to work. Sparks fly, drills shriek. After four years, you could have made a car with five others, built a desk or a wardrobe or any number of small-scale household items. Bookshelves, coatracks, knife blocks, bedframes. Anything you wanted, so long as there was the wood and the tools. Hawkins, being rural and inhabited by either farmers, farmers' kids, or people who sell things to farmers, has plenty of wood to go around and a lot of incentive to instil the DIY spirit in its teenagers.

Mr Shapiro, an ex-drill sergeant serving during the Vietnam war, took one look at Billy Hargrove on the day he arrived and sent him to

work with a group of four who were rebuilding a 1971 'Cuda. Hot red with chrome accents, the thing was going to be a beaut. It just needed a working engine and this year the boys working on it were finally getting around the fixing the defunct one the chassis had come with.

"Get on and help them out," said Mr Shapiro to Billy that first day. "You west coast boys know 'bout cars, don't cha?" It wasn't a question. Billy has been working on dismantling the eight-cylinder engine that should have fired at three-hundred and thirty horsepower. Currently, it choked and sputtered and refused to work.

The further Billy got into the engine, the more work he realised it needed. Whoever owned it was a moron. The whole thing was covered in old, oily gunk and full of random, off-brand parts that fit badly and damaged the rest of the components. It needed love, care, and an experienced hand. Billy joined the four boys – a jock, a basketballer, a stoner kid with permanently bloodshot eyes, and some smartass in glasses – and decided he was the man for the job. He didn't trust any of them not to screw this up.

And so Billy became the official engine repair guy of the crew and organised the others into cleaning components and running around town to find replacements and the specialty tools required to fix it. Any major hurdles he takes to Mr Shapiro, gets a quick answer, and he's on his way again. His time in Cali, working on his Camaro and stripping cars down for parts to sell in backlots and friends' garages, is priceless in all this.

The class is held in what was the school's swimming pool. It's since been converted, the pool itself filled in, and turned into a large, airy space with plenty of light from the high windows and a roller door at one end to bring cars in and out. The class is right at the back of the school, near the gym and on the opposite side of campus to the library. He is supposed to be down at the far end, by the roller door, resurfacing the cylinder head today.

His crew and Mr Shapiro are already there, glimpsed through the maze of heavy machinery and flying sparks and sawdust. Billy takes two steps towards them, when there's a crash and Mr Shapiro bursts into a frenzy of Spanish expletives. The stoner kid is wide eyed and

terrified. He managed to brain Mr Shapiro with a wrench. Mr Shapiro grabs the stoner kid by the ear and hauls him along the side of the room, stopping only once when he sees Billy. Blood runs down the side of his face.

“You’re helping Harrington today,” he grunts. “You’re not doing anything to that head without me supervising, you hear?” And they’re gone.

Damn, damn, damn, is everything going to be different today? He can’t deal with this. He prides himself on being adaptable but there’s a tension in his chest that is getting tighter and tighter the longer this goes on. Making his mother proud sounds good in theory. Doing it might just be impossible.

If Harrington says the wrong thing, that tension’s going to snap. He can feel it.

Billy enters the woodwork section, under the pale white through the skylights and the glaring fluorescent tubing hanging on chains. The twenty other senior boys are setting up their stations, getting to work sanding and carving and sawing their desks and wardrobes. They’re all grey ghosts moving about in the harsh lighting, washed out and concentrating. No one talks. Here is a place where boys have freedom to focus and create and not fail. Shop class is a religion to these kids.

Harrington and his fluffy head is at one of the benches. In front of him is a large wooden crate with a lid and multiple drawers, some the entire width of the box, others half and half again. Harrington lifts the lid and reveals that the top third of the box is segmented into three dozen compartments, with a slot at the back to hold what Billy can only guess would be a game board.

He knows what this is.

The D&D badly carved into the top of the lid kind of gives it away.

“Morning,” says Billy, affecting ease.

Harrington looks up and stares, incredulous. “What do you want?”

Here is someone who expects the worst from him. There’s no

tightrope with Harrington. There's nothing to lose. Even being slightly less of a bastard to Steve Harrington will be a victory. This is brilliant. The tension vanishes, as if it had never been there to begin with.

Billy can't help grinning and it freaks Harrington out.

"I'm helping you today."

"You're *what*?"

"What's this ugly thing for, anyway?"

Harrington grabs the lid and slams it on, hand covering the mangled *D&D* badly carved with a chisel. "It's for a kid I know," he snaps. "What do you want, Hargrove?"

"I'm just following orders, bud." Billy ignores Harrington and his disbelief and not unexpected bitterness and yanks the box towards himself.

"Hey!"

Billy notes that Harrington's got three sets of gold hinges on the bench, along with a hand drill and screws. No ruler or pencils. Moron. You don't do something freehand if you can measure it first. "Don't you want this varnished?" he asks.

"Uhh," says Harrington.

"You've sanded it, right?" Billy smooths a hand over the surface, then checks the interior. He's done a good job of it so far. There are a few nicks here and there, a few rough patches, and one of the drawers has a thinner internal wall than it should. Otherwise it's not bad. Billy points out the areas that need attention in the base, shoves it back over to Harrington, and takes the lid for himself. Maybe he can salvage the *D&D* with enough care. Maybe.

"What is wrong with you?" says Harrington.

"Testing a new bullying technique," says Billy. He smirks up at Harrington, quick and sharp. "Is it working?"

Harrington glares – it's unintimidating, the dude's about as scary as a poodle, and fights as well as one too. "Asshole. So that it? Your dad's arrested and suddenly you're nice?"

He has a brief vision of smashing Harrington over the head with the lid. It comes and goes like a breath of wind.

Instead, Billy shrugs and keeps chiselling. He focuses on smoothing the line of the first D. The ampersand symbol is going to be hell to fix. What did Harrington do to it? Use a hammer?

And Harrington, moron, keeps digging.

"Or is it because of that girl, what's-her-name, Asher Strange?"

"Get to work," Billy orders. "Before I stop being nice to you."

"Oh, scary," Harrington mumbles, but at least he starts sanding the bottom drawer. After twenty minutes of blissful silence and blatantly ignoring each other, Harrington speaks up, haltingly, too quiet for the others around to hear – not that they would over the grinding and shearing metal.

"You know," he says, "my old man's a piece of work too."

Billy almost leaves then and there. He's on the second D. So close to escape.

"It could be worse. He and Mom are never home. I think he can't stand me as much as I can't stand him."

Was the guy rehearsing this while they were quiet? The words trot out at a rapid clip like he might lose momentum if he's interrupted and he might not complete whatever pity-driven inspirational speech he's cooked up for Billy's ears only.

"I mean it's not *bad*. He doesn't hit me or anything. He just doesn't *care* about me. At all. It's like not having a father in the first place. Never taught me to ride a bike or anything. He and Mom spend most of their life on the other side of the country while I'm stuck here in Hawkins."

Billy's seen Harrington's house. A big two-storey modern place with a pool dwelling amongst the trees on the other side of the tracks. What's the bastard got to complain about? It's not a black mansion in the middle of nowhere and there's no one inside waiting to flay the backs of his legs with a belt buckle.

Then Harrington says, "I get it. You and your dad. I get why you're so _"

Billy interrupts him – by stabbing the chisel into the workbench half an inch from Harrington's hand. "Be careful, Stevie. You don't want to go saying things that get you into trouble."

Old habits die hard, thinks Billy.

Harrington gapes at him, then his expression goes hard and he slams both hands on the bench, looming towards Billy. His prepared speech gets tossed out the window. "You know what? Fine. Keep being a bastard for all I care. Hang out with douchebags who drive you into the dirt, drink to solve your problems, screw up every relationship you ever have. The rest of us are gonna get on with our lives and have proper friends."

"Is that what you're offering right now? Friendship?"

"What, no!" Harrington is positively horrified. "Who would be friends with a violent Rob Lowe wannabe?"

"You're not so flash yourself, sunshine," Billy shoots back. "Ever since Nancy dumped your ass, your only friends are a bunch of middle schoolers, am I right?"

"One of them is your sister, who likes me more than she likes you. Do you even *have* any friends?"

"*Step*-sister. Friends are for suckers. Learn to live on your own two feet, Harrington."

"Ain't that depressing," Harrington mutters. He goes back to sanding the bottom of the third drawer. Billy scowls and tries to yank the chisel out of the bench. It doesn't budge. Harrington snickers. Billy backhands him in the temple. Harrington smacks him right back.

A minute later, Billy has freed the chisel and is ripping into Harrington for his terrible woodworking abilities, while Harrington gives it right back with pointed comments on how Billy's bad attitude scares away anyone half decent, which isn't true, considering he's managed to scare away Tommy H and Carol, and Asher Strange made him oatmeal for breakfast, but he's not about to admit that to Harrington.

Somewhere over the next three hours of their extended Shop class, Billy and Harrington reach an understanding. All their anger at the injustice of their lives is poured out on each other with the knowledge that no matter what they say, it won't change the other's opinion. They already hate each other. Might as well make use of it.

Symbiotic antagonists is one description of their budding relationship. Friends is another.

Martin, one of the bad academics and an aspiring actor and occupying an adjacent bench, keeps an open air to the constant vitriol. He's impressed. He didn't know it was possible to find so many faults in another person.

When the bell rings for lunch, Martin has a new vocabulary of inventive slurs and swear words for his improv club. That upstart Drew won't know what hit him.

He has also learned that there are three topics that are off-limits; mothers, girls, and The Hair.

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Today I am not distracted by Morell or the pool, thank the Lord. My mind lingers on The Investigation, focusing on its strangeness, the mystery that has to be solved, the small steps taken on an unlit path with a dodgy torch in order to find the truth, whatever that may be. I plan on finding Troy Baker during the middle school's lunch period, which starts half an hour after ours. That will give me fifteen minutes

to hunt him down and interrogate. If that fails, I'll find Mike Wheeler, though knowing him he'll be with his little gang which now includes Maxine and won't that be interesting, finally meeting the renowned step-sister. I wonder how she's taking Neil's arrest. How's her mother doing? Susan must have had a reason to marry Neil and I hope it wasn't for financial reasons because that line of income has just dried up and she's got two teenagers living under her roof.

Well. Kind of. Billy seems to have taken over Kato's room as of this morning. The room certainly *smells* like Billy, of sweat and musk and cigarette smoke. The smell of that comes with a person never featured in my fantasies of not living alone, rather like Billy himself. Of all people who could become someone important to me, of *all* people, and that's including Carol and Tommy H, Billy Hargrove was the last one on my list.

Can I be blamed? If the rumours are true, Billy is a sex-driven, alcohol-fuelled maniac, cruising from one fight to another in his beast of a car, expletives and innuendo dripping from his lips until the havoc begins.

But he's not. And that worries me.

I heard his heart through that piano. It was riotous and uncontrolled and mesmerising. It was glorious. I want to hear it again. I want to wake up and have to make oatmeal for two again. I want – I want – Oh, dear Lord, I want him to stay, even more than I did last night when he left. I am beginning to hope, beginning to dream, and that's dangerous because dreaming for people to stay never goes well for me.

Please, Lord, let Your will be done. Protect my heart. Save me from myself, I pray, over and over, through AP English and Chemistry and AP World History.

I know well the damage toxic hope can cause. It's what twisted my heart in knots for years, dreaming about my parents coming back, about Kato coming back, to the point where every phone call might have been them telling me they're sorry they ever left and when I picked up, heart racing, and it wasn't them . . . I broke a little more, cracked a little further, and just to escape those desolate evenings

when my hopeless hoping was more burden than I could bear, I went to Jermaine and allowed him to control me. I clung to that boy like a lifeline. Poor, hurting Asher. Looking for satisfaction in others to the point where you compromised yourself for the dream of not being alone. What were you thinking? Idiot.

That grey ocean ripples, threatening to swallow me whole.

Without warning, the sheer exhaustion of trying to exist alone, of holding up reality with hopes and dreams that are as solid as the wind, of simply taking care of myself, of this nightmare weekend, heaps itself on my shoulders and I slump forward on my desk. *I'm tired. You take over. You're God of literally everything, you can do a much better job of curating my life than I can. I'm done trying and failing and feeling anxious all the time. Have at it, Father, because I've got nothing.*

Strangely, a song that came out two years ago starts playing in my head. A bright, peppy disco number mainly about some guy trying to get a girl to spend the night with him. The chorus starts playing on repeat.

Na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, now

Baby give it up, give it up, Baby give it up!

I giggle despite myself and am covered for by the ringing of the lunch bell. The formidable Mr Ross's tirade on the evils of Nazi Germany for the third year running is cut off. He claps his hands. "Right, you lot, off to the gym!"

What? I sit up and watch my classmates collect their things and file out and all turn towards the gym. Bemused, KC and the Sunshine Band still repeating in my head, I follow them through the chilly cinderblock halls. Other seniors join our stream, brightly coloured fish in striped jerseys and puffer jackets and knitted scarves. We pare a path through the younger years who flit around us, clinging to the beige lockers and the club posters and the occasional bench that are normally occupied by us. There's a lot of talking, a lot of staring, and a lot of glances at me.

For the first time that morning, I pay attention to student conversation. It goes something like this:

“Gosh, another memorial already? Isn’t this all too depressing? All that stuff with Barb and Will and now Joe and Mikey and Tyler and Strange. Our town is supposed to be boring! Why does scary stuff keep happening in Hawkins? That Morell guy better be rotting in jail somewhere. Oh, and about jail, did you hear what happened to Billy’s dad? Turns out he used to beat the guy black and blue and he killed Billy’s mom and that’s why Billy’s such a psycho; Carol told me, that’s how I know. Apparently, he freaked out at her and Tommy H yesterday, went completely psycho at them, like Steve did last year. Oh! And did you hear that, like, the day after Asher was attacked in her house, Clutha dumped her because she didn’t give him the story straight away? He even evicted her from the newspaper club. Well, it didn’t take her long to move on, did it? Saw her getting out of Hargrove’s car this morning. The loner and the psycho. It’s like something from a movie. Hey, hey, shut up! She’s right there!”

I could care less about their schoolyard suppositions. I’m stuck on the first sentence.

A memorial. Of Joe and Mikey. Who are a pair of corpses in a gelatinous cesspool that is yet to be drained and their killer’s bruises ring my neck and we’re all going to file into the frigid gym to hear Mrs Murphy, our principal, talk about their loss? And I’m going to be expected to just sit there and listen?

Right. Ha-ha, nope, not happening. I’m off to find Troy Baker, even if it means huddling outside the middle school building in the snow, waiting for the kids to come out and avoiding being seen by any high school teachers.

I make a break for it, pushing through vests and plaid jackets and darting down the science corridor. Juniors, held back to tidy up their experiments, spill out now and I bump into the famous Best Friend of Barb.

Nancy Wheeler: journalist; all of them . . . except Mr Mundy’s math class; searching for the truth.

Well. The Lord certainly does move in mysterious ways.

“Nancy!” I cry.

“Hi,” she says, a little wary. She clutches her schoolbooks to her chest like a shield. “Asher, right? Asher Strange?”

We’re eye to eye and twenty pounds different in weight which isn’t demoralising or anything. I bike to and from school more days than not, scurry around town following up stories for Jermaine, chop wood, fix plumbing, live on the third floor of my house, and *still* the idea of being as skinny as Nancy Wheeler is a far-off fantasy.

Stop complaining. Your body is perfectly functional. What’s the problem?

Right, right, no time for that. Keyed up and not caring about niceties and the fact that this might be rather insensitive if Benny’s death is related to Barb’s death in any way – oh dear, this might be a tactical error – I start digging around in my satchel while saying, “Would you mind helping me with something, since you’re going to be a journalist and all?” I find the item in question. It’s the photo of Troy Baker, Mike Wheeler, and that girl. I pass it to Nancy. “Do you think you can help me find out who this girl is? I’ve been looking into Benny Hammond’s death and I think this girl might be involved somehow.”

I pause. Nancy’s gone white as a sheet, hand claw-like as it clutches the floppy print. Gosh, the girl must be related to Barbara’s death then. Which is, well, awful, but very, very interesting, and being with Jermaine has really screwed with my empathy. “Nancy? What’s wrong?”

She rallies in a second, pasting on polite confusion. “Sorry, no. Do you want me to hold on to this and ask some people?” She checks her watch. “Oh, I have to go. I’ll let you know if I find anything. Bye, Asher!”

I start to go after her. “Hey, wait-”

A mountain in a polo shirt suddenly blocks my path.

“Strange? Why aren’t you at the memorial?” says Mr Clayton, my six-

foot-six chemistry teacher, who used to be a bouncer, is a black belt in taekwondo, and only took the job because Hawkins' single club closed down last year and a bouncer's wage doesn't make enough to escape this backwater town.

"I was talking to Nancy Wheeler."

He jerks his head in the direction of the gymnasium. "Come along. I'm heading there now." He whistles for me to follow, like I'm a dog, which he does to everyone when he wants a class's attention.

I sigh internally. So much for mysterious ways. Now Nancy has my only copy of the photo with the girl and my escape plan has failed.

I trudge along behind Mr Clayton to the interior gymnasium entrance. There are four more ways to get inside – through the locker rooms, or the two external accesses, one from the field side, the other from the courtyard.

The courtyard is a narrow space sandwiched between the gym and one side of the high school building, a strip of concrete and planter boxes and tables that gets a single shaft of sunlight. I've never known whether it was planned or an architectural mishap. It's since become the retreat of seniors when it's warm enough to get off the corridor benches and brave the outside. An alley skirting the back of the gym connects the courtyard to the field. Besides the external gym doors there is only one other access to the courtyard. Through a door, fifteen feet down the hallway from the interior gym doors. We pass it and I look through the glass at the snow-covered picnic tables and the small shrubs that bend under their dustings of white and its almost pretty, a small patch of tranquil solitude in the middle of the rush and tumble. I toy with diving through the doors and hoping Mr Clayton won't notice.

He would though. The guy's got eyes in the back of his head. He once spun and tossed a blackboard duster with such accuracy it knocked the spitball straw out of Marlon Kay's mouth without touching the boy's nose. Mr Clayton then asked Sidney to pick up the duster and return it and went back to writing on the chalkboard.

That was our introduction to Mr Clayton in August.

Miss Davidson is loitering beside the gym doors, hustling the stragglers inside. She sees Mr Clayton and lights up, red lipstick smile dazzling in its welcome. "Afternoon, Adrian," she greets.

"Afternoon, Julie," he replies, in a voice that has softened to warm butter. No dog whistle for her, I note. Miss Davidson opens her mouth to respond, sees me, and exclaims, "Oh, good, you found her."

"That I did. I'll see you in there?"

"I'll only be a moment. I need to talk to Asher first."

I need to remind everyone that there is a memorial for two dead boys happening on the other side of the swinging gym doors.

"Save you a seat?"

"Please."

And Miss Davidson's smile becomes bashful as she watches Mr Clayton's muscled back until the swinging doors hide it from view.

"Miss Davidson?"

My favourite teacher blinks and returns to the mundanity of an Adrian Clayton-free corridor. "Yes, Asher, Mrs Murphy wanted to tell you that because the memorial might bring up some difficult memories, you and Tyler Matheson and Billy Hargrove don't have to attend. You are fully excused."

Hallelujah!

"Now, I've talked to Tyler already and he's decided to spend lunch on the field. Do you know where Billy could be?" She spies something over my shoulder and pure amazement washes over her face. "Will wonders never cease."

I turn.

It takes a moment to compute what I'm seeing.

It's Billy. And Steve. Walking. *Together*. Striding shoulder to shoulder

down the corridor towards us, Billy dapper in my father's coat and turtleneck and boots, Steve the quintessential 80s teen in his puffer vest and fluffy hair. He must use product, that sort of volume isn't natural, just like Billy must shape his eyebrows because no way that level of thick black brow grows so uniformly. I'm sure he used my tweezers this morning.

They slouch along, studied in their casualness, sending barbs back and forth about basketball techniques, occasionally smirking and looking so much like friends that I'm not sure I trust my eyes. The shiner Billy gave Steve has yet to fade completely. They catch us watching them. Billy winks at me.

"Is this your influence?" Miss Davidson whispers to me.

"Doubt it," I reply. This is on the level of divine intervention.

The two of them amble up. Steve is tall and gangly, Billy is short and muscled. Steve likes stupid humour. Billy likes beating others at their own games. Steve is pasty from the unseasonably overcast Hawkins autumn. Billy retains his Cali tan.

And for all that, I'm struck by a similarity close to brotherhood. There's something shared between them, a fact of their lives, that makes them alike where the superficial doesn't. It's deeper than preferences and hometowns and if I was pushed to guess I'd say it's to do with bad fathers and high school hierarchies and not quite fitting anywhere.

Now one of the bad fathers is gone and the other is hardly around, the hierarchy is turned against them by Carol and Tommy H, and it seems the not quite fitting anywhere has changed to not quite fitting anywhere with each other.

Mysterious ways indeed.

"Afternoon, Miss," Steve greets, all ease and good humour. "Sup, Strange."

"Hi, Steve. How are you?"

Steve shrugs. "I'd be better if it wasn't for this ass- . . ." He bites his

lip and glances at Miss Davidson. Billy raises his perfect eyebrows, a cat sighting its canary.

“Wanna finish your sentence, Harrington?” he drawls.

“Nah, you know what, I’m good. Life’s great right now. No problems here.”

“Glad to hear it,” Miss Davidson says drily, and she relays Mrs Murphy’s courtesy to Billy.

“Wait, what?” Steve protests. “He wasn’t even there when Joe and Mikey got, you know – uh – why does *he* get to skip it?”

“You don’t want to mourn the loss of your two classmates who you’ve known your whole life?” Billy asks, apparently upset by Steve’s lack of compassion. He has the most innocent expression I have ever seen in my life and I doubt one of us believes it.

Steve gapes, glares, snaps his mouth shut and shoves through the gym doors, grumbling under his breath all the while. Miss Davidson, lips pursed over her amusement, winks at us. “Stay out of trouble, you two,” she says.

“Will do.” I salute and walk away with a deep sigh of release. The vice around my chest unwinds, letting air into my lungs. I’m almost light headed. I didn’t realise how afraid I was to be forced to sit in that assembly and listen and try not to remember, knowing that I would, knowing that the eyes of every senior student would be on me while I slipped further and further into panic and the pool.

Thank you, Lord, for thou art good to me.

7. Recti Cultus Pectora Roborant

Billy falls into step next to me, adjusting the way his mullet falls over the collar of the coat. He's much calmer than he was this morning. I noticed it at breakfast and the drive to school in the way he couldn't stop fidgeting, scowling. The constant smoking was a bit of a giveaway too. Steve, somehow, has managed to quiet that storm, or at least siphon off some of the restive energy. "Where are you going?" he asks.

I turn left and step into the empty courtyard. The quiet wraps itself around me. Here, the growling of town cars and freight trucks is blocked by the cinderblocks, with nary a window to intrude on the privacy of the concrete strip. I close my eyes and breathe in the cool, calm air, gentler than the icebox of the school. Hawkins High always manages to be a few degrees cooler than the outside during winter and a few degrees warmer during summer. I get the feeling the mildness won't last. This is the calm before another storm sets in. High above, the luminous clouds are starting to quicken and more featherlight tears are shed by the minute, beading on my eyelashes, my cheekbones. The silence sings the beauty of the world in my ear.

The door opens and thunks shut. "Hell," he mutters, coming up behind me. "It's freezing. What is wrong with you people?"

"Poor Californian boy," I croon. "Is the heartland too cold for you?"

"I prefer the coast."

"You know, I've never seen the ocean before."

There's a picnic table against one wall, the bench protected by the eaves. It's dry and not too cold, hidden from view by a row of ornamental holly trees in one of the planter boxes. I draw a star in the inch of snow on the table top. He doesn't sit yet. He's too outraged. This is the boy with the sea in his heart, after all.

"How can you not have seen the ocean?"

"Never had the opportunity. California is thirty hours away."

"You think I don't know that?" He wrinkles his nose. "New York's eleven. You could bus, or train."

"I suppose." I draw a wave in the snow, and another, and another. "I guess I've never thought about it. I like my prairie. When the snow is deep enough the wind pushes it into ripples. I imagine it's what the seabed looks like. Wait a few weeks, you'll see what I mean." Then I smile up at him. "Sit down. I'll find the ocean, don't worry about it."

After a moment, he does and of one mind we eat the sandwiches I made last night. Strips of ham, cheese, the very last of the greenhouse tomatoes and lettuce, set between Mrs Smith's delicious sourdough bread. I have one. Billy has three. We eat without speaking, same as breakfast, then I return to my drawing and he closes his eyes.

He leans back against the wall, arms folded, legs stretched out under the table and crossed at the ankles. For all intents and purposes he appears asleep. He has the darkest eyelashes I've ever seen on a boy. The carefully tousled hair, the sharpness of his jaw, the snub of his nose, these things I noticed the moment I laid eyes on him. The beauty of his face that he deforms with a glare and a cigarette.

He isn't scowling right now. There are no lines in his brow or twist to his lips. He's relaxed and, dare I say it, approachable, and less than a foot away, and I repeat my prayer. *Lord, you take over, because I don't know what to do.*

Eyes closed, he mutters, "Go in summer. It's the best time for the beach if you've never been."

"Hmm? We'll have graduated by then next year. Isn't that odd? Have you thought about what you'll do?"

"Car mechanic. Surf instructor. Seasonal work. Anything that lets me travel," he says gruffly. I can imagine him and his Camaro, flitting from one job to the next, never being tied down until he found somewhere he loved. Discovering himself, without the pressures of school and home. I can barely imagine how that freedom must taste. One day, though. One day I might find my own adventure, even if I have to do it alone.

Loneliness flares and I crush it down. I'm all right. I like my own company. I can be alone.

Besides, last time I tried to find people to share life with I found Jermaine and look how well that turned out. From now on, I'm going to let God bring the people to me and get on with my life.

"Lucky," I say, breathing a laugh. "I managed to wrangle a scholarship to Yale so I'm there for at least four years come August twenty-eighth. You see? I will be right by the beach." I add a moon to what's become a night time beachfront, complete with two people sitting under a single palm tree, looking out over the water to the endless horizon.

"Nantucket's not far from there."

"Huh?" I glance at him and he's staring at me straight on, assessing, those brows furrowed and those blue eyes intense and I can't hold the look. I return to my drawing, adding a few more stars, pretending ease.

"It's got some of the best surfing on the eastern seaboard."

"Has it?"

Out the corner of my eye I see him open his mouth to speak and I slap my hand over his closest knee, digging my fingers in, and gesture for him to be quiet. In his incredulous silence, he hears it. Hushed voices coming from the alleyway leading to the field. Who could be out here right now? All the senior school is in the assembly, and the middle schoolers are still in class.

"I don't *know* what she knows! She said she was looking into Benny Hammond's death and she thinks El is connected."

"Do you know why?"

"Not at all. But did you ever see this?"

"Never. Where did she get it?"

"I don't know."

It's Nancy and Jonathan Byers and it doesn't take a genius to guess what they're talking about. Billy opens his mouth again and I slap my hand over it. Propriety be damned, I need to hear this. Nancy is panicky. Jonathan is soothing and harried. I was *right*, Nancy knows something about that girl and my digging into it has them rattled.

"What should we do?" asks Nancy.

"Get Mike to talk to this kid and make sure he doesn't tell Asher anything. We have to keep El safe."

"Obviously," Nancy snipes, "But that won't deter her. Asher was the best in the newspaper club. She'll keep digging until she gets the truth."

"We'll be fine, Nance. Murray thought El was a Russian spy and he investigated this for months."

"Murray was an outsider. Everyone here knows Ash, and they'll talk to her too. She'll put the pieces together."

"Now who's worrying too much," Jonathan chuckles. "We only believed in all this because you and my mom saw the Demogorgon. El got rid of it and the Mind Flayer when she closed the gate, and she's safe and sound at Hopper's. See? Asher won't be able to find out a thing. Whatever she does find out won't make any sense. She'll give up eventually. Meanwhile we can relax and be normal teenagers for a while. No more shooting monsters for at least a year."

Nancy scoffs. "Normal is boring."

There's scuffing and footsteps crunching through powder as the couple retreats down alleyway, around the gym and out of earshot.

... What?

Billy's hand closes around my wrist and takes my hand from his lips. "Oh, sorry," I mumble, moving out of his personal space while thinking a mile a minute. I'm remembering a book that Kato used to read religiously, to the point where the front cover and its weird horned demon creature fell off the spine. "Demogorgons and Mind Flayers are monsters from Dungeons and Dragons," I say aloud.

Billy gazes at one of the holly trees, deep in thought. "Harrington was building a D&D box," he muses.

"Probably for Dustin Henderson, Mike Wheeler's friend."

He nods. "My sister was at Byers' house with that whole group. Harrington was there too."

I frown at him, thinking. "That was the same night Bob Newby died from the wolf attack." Pieces of the puzzle are starting to join together in my mind in half-formed pictures of pink dresses and D&D monsters and resurrected boys and khaki uniforms. Have I stumbled upon a conspiracy, one that uses D&D as a code or something? If so, then surely Mike Wheeler and his friends are at the heart of it. Last year they won best-dressed at Halloween, dressing as their different Dungeons and Dragons; the paladin, the cleric, the ranger, and the bard. And Nancy is going to send Mike to talk to Troy, I assume, and stop him from speaking, which means she'll be finding him at lunch and talking to the others in his gang and then they'll all be prepared against any questions I have for them. Darn it.

"I might need to talk to Hopper after all," I whisper, not expecting Billy to hear. But he does. And he rolls his eyes.

"Course the chief's in on this. Because a small-town conspiracy ain't complete without the sheriff. Damn Demogorgons and dead kids coming back to life and loner girls getting killed by toxic waste from an department of energy lab. You sure this ain't a movie? You're not a pod person, are you?" He clicks his fingers. "MK-Ultra. This town is all one big mind control experiment. I knew Hawkins was screwed up the moment I got here. Suicide my ass, I bet they drugged that guy who committed suicide. They did it to some scientist in Maryland, you know. He jumped out a window because he was so out of his mind."

Putting aside the fact that Billy Hargrove is a seemingly untapped well of US Government misadventure and old SciFi movies, I ask, "But why would Mike Wheeler be involved?"

"Because kids like that don't go to the police or their parents when they find something weird. They keep it to themselves until it gets

too big and their parents find out and call the police, then it all gets hushed up by the authorities and the story gets rewritten for the press. Who's Murray?"

"That's probably Murray Beaman. Barbara Holland's parents hired him to investigate their daughter's disappearance. He broke the story of the chemical leak to Chicago."

Billy nods, satisfied. "See. He found out about this El chick, someone got wind of it, and they shut it down and made him rewrite history." He chuckles in the face of my disbelief. "I'm more than a pretty face."

That's when the gym door opens into the courtyard and Steve wanders out, peering around. He spots us behind the holly trees and grimaces. "Am I interrupting?"

"I'm always glad to see you, Stevie boy," calls Billy.

"Shut up, Miss Davidson said to check if you were out here. She wants to make sure you're okay."

"Do you like D&D?"

Steve scowls. "I told you, it's for a kid I know," he says. "Why?"

"You ever heard of a Demogorgon?"

Steve's eyes go wide. *Hello sudden line of inquiry.* Billy and I sit up as one.

"Or a Mind Flayer?" I add.

"What's that gate El closed?" asks Billy.

"Should I send a congratulations card to Hopper on his adoption?"

A predatory grin stretches over his lips. "Or should we ask Henderson about it?"

Steve coughs, laughs, runs a hand through his hair. "What the hell are you guys on about?" he asks. He can't hide the nervous hitch in his voice.

Billy and I look at each other and nod. "Let's ask Dustin," I say. "He'll tell us."

"That kid's a squealer if I ever saw one," Billy agrees.

"You guys are nuts." Steve tries for dismissive and fails utterly. Yup, he knows something. There's a reason Steve never continued acting after freshman year – I've seen first-hand how terrible he is at keeping in character.

I, however, can compartmentalise with the best of them, and I shuffle the fact that Nancy Wheeler will no doubt tell all the kids about me and the picture before I can get to them off to the back of my mind where it won't get in the way.

"Come on," I stage whisper to Billy. "If we go now, we can find them before Steve gets in the way."

Billy stands up and stretches, flexes, cracks his knuckles, putting on a show and I know his expressions well enough to see that he's loving the charade. Steve doesn't. He hasn't spent a weekend in close quarters, shared dinners and breakfasts and discussion about the future and conspiracies to understand when that twinkle in Billy's eye is from humour or anticipating savagery, as it was with Morell. Dustin Henderson is his friend and a kid.

"Bloody psycho," Steve mutters under his breath. He looks towards the middle school and grimaces. The internal battle plays out on his face. Whatever secret he's holding must be big, big enough for him to consider letting Billy get at Dustin Henderson.

There really must be a conspiracy in Hawkins. Whoa.

Steve groans and rolls his eyes to Heaven. "Fine! This is just because I don't want you messing with him, all right? They've all been through enough without Billy Hargrove interrogating them. You're mad, you do know that."

"Only for you, Harrington."

Save me from alpha males and their pseudo-sexual rituals. "Great!" I rub my hands to get some warmth back in them and step out from

behind the picnic table. "I'm going to talk to the nurse and get Billy and I an exemption for the rest of the day. We can talk at my place."

"What about me?" says Steve.

"It's nothing to be scared of," Billy soothes. "Skipping a few classes won't kill you."

Steve levels a dead-eyed stare at him and Billy's mocking stops.

"You have no idea what I'm scared of, Hargrove."

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Billy and Steve drive carefully, their town cars not built for winter, through a monochrome world. The moment we leave the tunnel of pine trees, a white and black world spreads out around us. The pines curve around the prairie as a black wall against the faceless sky, cut off by the southern farm fences, then thrust through again to cloak Hawkins College far on the other side of the snow-strewn tallgrass. Far, far north, the hills are misty and grey and smeared in white and vanish into the atmosphere.

Central in this, among the storm-snapped tallgrass and mounds of muhly grass and the collapsing flowers that lose their colour to the cold and the silence, is the tower of my home. The snow falling on the steep roofs and the chimneys has done nothing to integrate it into the landscape. It remains inviolate, out of place, and simply wrong. It's made blacker by all the white.

We come to the gravel drive and roll towards the monolith. It looms, taller and taller. The glass of the windows rising in lines up the front facade is opaque and staring. The front door hunkers in the shadows under the veranda, beckoning us into the madness of W.J. Morell. A flash of his grandson's words – *"he needs my help. He's going to rebuild the world and he wants me to do it"* – makes me tighten my fists in my lap.

It's okay. Morell is gone. There's no one inside. I repeat it over and over, to no effect.

It's Billy who eases my panic. "Do you think we could convince Harrington the place is haunted?" he mutters, casting disturbed eyes over the weatherboards. A laugh bursts out of my lips. It's going to be fine. Billy's here.

When the boys shut off their engines, the silence sweeps in and smothers us. It's eerie after the violence of last night's storm.

We get out. Steve is uneasy. "This is where Morell . . ."

"Sure is," Billy says lightly. "There's a noose hanging in the attic."

"You're joking." Steve asks me, "He's joking?"

"Yes." I'm distracted. Something in the snow has caught my eye. "What's that?"

A set of footprints are half-visible, almost covered up by fresh fall. They were made hours ago, heading up the drive to the shed. The snow is piled up where the shed door is swung open. The prints are accompanied by a thick, unbroken line on the way back out. The prints straddle the line at one point, and then there are no more footprints and the line disappears into one of the paths through the tallgrass towards Hawkins College.

"They stole my bike!" I cry, racing over to the shed. There should be two bikes here, a blue one for summer and another, with fat tyres and a bright green saddle and propped up against the spades. The fat bike isn't there. There's nothing except melting snow on bare dirt tracking from the door to the spades and back, and that line tracking out towards Hawkins College. Goosebumps ripple across my flesh

Morell's in custody. It's not him. Hopper's got him.

The thought doesn't steady me as much as it should, not when suspicions of grand conspiracies and police involvement are wheeling around my head. I can't afford to lose it. Not over a bike. Not in front of Steve Harrington.

So I groan, knowing Billy is behind me and can hear. "How am I supposed to get into town now?"

"Stop complaining," he snaps. "I'll drive you. If the chief learns I left you stranded out here, he'll have my neck."

"Ah, chivalry. How dead you are." I close the shed door. "I have to do grocery shopping. Mr Smith doesn't deliver in winter. And . . . it might mean staying the night a lot."

He looks heavenward. "Do you want my help or not?"

"Thanks."

He clicks the padlock on the shed door. It's the first time I've locked it since Kato left. "Don't mention it."

We meet Steve on our way around to the front of the house. "What's wrong?" he asks. He's dancing on the spot, rubbing his hands and blowing on them and flicking the snow out of his hair.

"Someone stole my bike."

"All the way out here? Which way did they go?"

"That way. Through the grass, away from town."

"I don't get it. Why not go for the house?" Then he begs, "Can we go inside now?" and the matter is dropped. He doesn't know Morell stole my bike before. I am not going to be the one to tell him, not when it might distract from the confession he's about to give us.

It's no warmer in the house. Billy heads straight to the kitchen, curses, and barges through the backdoor, hopefully to collect some firewood. Steve and I loiter in the entrance hall. Steve is in the centre of the stairwell, neck craned back. The stairs spiral up and up above his head towards the attic. "How old is this place?" he asks, voice strained by the position.

"It was built in 1882. This way," I say, steering the fascinated Steve past the staircase and the small toilet underneath it and into the kitchen. Gosh, it is weird to be home in the middle of a school day.

For practical reasons, the idea of haring off from school and heading home whenever I want is not feasible, especially not in winter. Biking through snow is something I try to avoid, preferring to wait until the school day is over and hitching a ride from Jermaine. Also, Ditching School doth not a Yale Scholarship Make.

“Have you had lunch?”

He hasn't. I put the leftover casserole in the microwave as Billy comes in with an armful of chair pieces and actual logs. He bypasses Steve in favour of tending to the fire. Steve watches him work and I make coffee and arrange Steve's lunch in front of him and it's nice and domestic and bizarre up until the point where Billy comes to sit at the vast kitchen table, full of gashes and gouges filled in with flour, and prompts, “Go on, Harrington. Amaze us.”

Then it stops being nice and domestic.

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“And we set fire to the tunnels, the Mind Flayer left Will, and then El closed the gate.” Harrington reaches forward and snatches a shiny red apple from the wooden bowl. He brings it to his lips before hesitating. “Can I have this?”

Asher shoves away from the table and barrels through the kitchen door and across the yard and out onto the prairie, on and on and on, a small figure in green crunching along a path Billy cannot see until she vanishes behind a huge drift covering what had been an orb of bright pink muhly grass the day before. She does not reappear.

“Should we go after her?” asks Harrington, worry pooling in his eyes.

Billy ignores him and instead finds the box of random oddities he noticed that morning. It's tucked away beside the microwave, full of rubber bands and clothes pegs and keys and a pack of cards. He takes the cards and returns to the table. “What do you know?”

Harrington hesitates, wary. "Speed?"

Billy dies a little inside, shuffles, halves the deck, hands over Harrington's portion of cards. They shove the fruit bowl out of the way, come to an agreement on which card does what, and start to play. Harrington, to Billy's chagrin, is the better player. It's not much of an insult, though. If they were playing poker, this would be a different story.

"You believe in God?" queries Billy during their third game. Harrington falters and Billy slaps his hand down, "Speed!", and wins the round. They reshuffle, set out their cards. Start again.

"I never thought about it," Harrington replies. He finds an opening and starts turning the tide in his favour. "I guess there must be something out there."

"She believes in God," says Billy.

"Asher? How do you know?"

"She goes to church, she sings church songs while cooking, she has a Bible next to her bed. Do the math, Stevie boy. If you were her—"

"Speed!" Harrington shouts, and the fifth game starts.

"-how would you take having your religion upended by that psycho story you just fed us?"

"It's the truth, dumbass."

"I know. Doesn't make it any less ridiculous."

"You think she's having, what, a crisis of faith?"

"Give the boy a prize. Speed!"

On game ten, six to three to Harrington, Harrington asks suspiciously, "How come you're taking this so well?"

It's not complicated. His mom dabbled in the occult when he was little. Held seances, trailed salt on windowsills, hung bags of spices

above doors, that sort of thing. Drove his dad mad and eventually she stopped. Billy, in his childhood, thought it was normal to believe that spirits had to be appeased and crystals had healing properties and there was more to the world than meets the eye – more than you could find in a church, anyway.

As he grew and understood that most people didn't even care whether there was a God or spiritual realm or not, he shrugged and let the whole situation lie. Far as he was concerned, life was a mess and the best thing was to roll with the punches. Getting attached to a person or a place or a philosophy was a recipe for disappointment.

Then again, the story could be a grand hoax or Harrington could be nuts. Billy doesn't think so. It makes too much sense. Harrington answered Asher's questions about the deaths and the blackouts and the random girl who turns out to be a remnant of MK-Ultra – Billy tried not to grin at that, because he so called it – and the one who caused this whole bloody mess in the first place with a promptness that meant he's either rehearsed the story to a T – doubtful, Harrington isn't that smart – or it's true and the horror has seared itself into the grey matter of his goldfish brain.

So.

A parallel universe controlled by a giant shadow creature that possesses little boys and can be explained by D&D. What are the odds? It makes Billy wonder if the guys who created the game were in on the whole scheme.

If Billy was pressed, he'd say the biggest surprise is that Max knew and he never noticed she was carrying around a secret as big as this. He could have sworn he had a better handle on his step-sister. First she gets involved in paranormal horrors, then she gets his dad thrown in jail. What next? Dating Lucas Sinclair?

"I'm hard to surprise," says Billy. "You said Byers' brother had black veins when he was possessed, right?"

"Yeah? What of it?"

"Morell, that psycho who attacked Asher, he had the same thing.

Black veins in his eyes. Black blood. Kept going on and on about being needed by someone, needing the rebuild, needing to go back.”

Harrington absorbs this, growing more serious by the second. “Back where?” he asks. A hint of gritty resolution bleeds into his tone, born from experience. Billy heard the same thing in Byers’ home, right before getting nailed in the face by the dude’s knuckles. Harrington, for all his fluffy hair and his long, gangly limbs, has been through Hell of a sort and come out harder. Billy can relate.

“Hawkins College. Whoever stole Asher’s bike was headed for it.”

They both stop playing. Harrington’s aghast. “We need to check it out,” he exclaims, throwing down his cards.

“We wait for Asher first,” Billy asserts, and he places a jack on a queen.

“We don’t have time!” Harrington snatches the cards out of his hands.

Billy goes for Harrington’s wrist, aborts the move, brings his fist down on the table instead. He can’t use violence for everything. That’s his dad’s M.O., it can’t be his anymore. A frustrated groan burbling out of his throat, he glares at Harrington like the guy holds all of life’s problems. “We wait, all right?”

Harrington looks on the verge of exploding. “Why?”

“Chief’s orders. I’m meant to keep an eye on her.”

“Since when are you responsible?” Harrington snaps tartly.

Billy decides that his choices are A) hit Harrington and destroy whatever budding friendliness is between them and commit to being a violent bastard forever or B) smoke. He gets up and makes his way to the porch.

Three cigarettes later, the rumble of an old engine in need of a tune up cuts through the quiet moan of the increasing wind. Billy knows cars and he’s heard this one a hundred of times – a V8 engine inside a Ford at least a decade old, badly maintained, probably a hand-me-

down from father to some chump son who doesn't know the first thing about car mechanics. Teenage boys from the lower middle class drive them because their dad wanted to upgrade from the sedan they'd had since before the kid was born and that kid is happy to have it because it's a car because they sure as hell can't pay for one themselves.

When the rust bucket of a '70 Ford LTD turns into the drive and the headlights bear down on Billy, waiting on the porch steps, Billy smirks. The driver pulls up next to the white-coated Camaro and BMW – Billy needs to find a tarpaulin for his baby – and Jonathan Byers and Nancy Wheeler get out, alternating between scowling at him and staring in horrified wonder at the house. Unexpected visitors. How lucky that he's here to welcome them.

He calls, "My condolences, Wheeler. What a shame that the night Harrington pops your cherry, your best mate goes and gets eaten by a monster. That had to be better than a cold shower." His smirk turns wicked. "Then again, I think Holland got the better deal."

Lookie here. Turns out Jonathan Byers has an vicious streak.

Harrington appears on the porch at the last second, stopping the brawl before it can become one. Asher rushes out and ushers Wheeler and Byers inside with a tight smile and an offer of tea and Billy's impressed. If she's having a crisis of faith like he supposed, she hides it well and even manages to roll her eyes at him before going to the kitchen.

Harrington closes the door on them, shutting the boys out in the cold.

"Can you not shoot your mouth off for one minute?" he groans. "It's pathological with you, isn't it?"

Billy stubs out his last cigarette and crunches over the gravel to his car. The handle is frozen and the interior isn't much better. He leans inside, starts up the engine, turns the heating on full.

"Oh, *now* you're going."

The snow brushes off easily and, lucky for him, there's no frost on the

windscreen. "Shut it. Wheeler and Byers can watch her."

Harrington taps his foot in a restless tattoo, glancing at Billy, then the front door, and back to Billy. "We should ask for backup."

"Sure. Go on, ask your ex and her boyfriend."

"We're gonna get murdered," the teen grumbles under his breath as he stomps down the steps. Inside the Camaro he sucks in a breath through his teeth and shoves his hands against the slowly warming air vents. "Geez, it's freezing!"

"It's your shitty town."

"We should leave them a note."

"They'll figure it out."

"They won't –"

"Trust me. Asher will get it."

Harrington shuts his mouth. For a time. Long enough for Billy to traverse the drive and turn right at the main road. The black wall of pine trees creeps out of the white sheets of snow that, if Billy's not mistaken, have gotten denser as the day's gone by. The hills, once visible off to the north, are now entirely hidden.

"What's the deal with you two?" Harrington asks.

Shoot me now, thinks Billy. A heart to heart about girls with Steve Harrington? He'd prefer to drive straight into a tree, if he wasn't driving his Camaro. Byers' rust bucket LTD would crumple nicely. He visualises it, imagines the hood crumpling, the engine exploding through the steering wheel into the front seats, the sudden punching jerk of the stop. The tree would shake. Dislodged snow would thump onto the broken chassis and steam gently as the car clicked and cooled.

Billy drives under the bare canopy along a pale, snake-like road, and the dream fades with a new sense of unease that those sorts of fantasies have never brought before. He thinks about Asher seeing his

thoughts. Feels ashamed.

“She’s nice,” growls Billy.

“Lots of girls are nice,” Harrington points out. “Nancy’s nice.” Billy side-eyes him, sceptical. “What? She is.”

“She dumped your ass.”

“So? That doesn’t mean she isn’t nice. That was . . .”

“Word is she was cheating on you with Byers.”

“Shut up.”

“Touch a nerve?” Billy starts to leer, but his heart isn’t in it and it fades into nothing. He doesn’t have the energy to start another verbal war with this guy. They share the rest of Billy’s pack for the drive, sucking down tar and courage in preparation for whatever awaits them.

At long last the trees retreat and Billy slows to avoid damaging the Camaro on the rough, broken-up cobbles of Hawkins College’s old drive. Roots from the encroaching forest and from ornamental bushes that have, through neglect, time, and nature’s pernicious desire to expand, flourished into ugly monstrosities, dig through the grouting and crack the stones and make the path up to the school the site of a miniature earthquake. The jutting faults and chasms make the Camaro shudder and bounce. They creep through the abandoned garden towards the college, Billy swearing every time he hears scraping and pinging of stones on metal.

There are probably flowers in the garden during the spring. In winter, it’s become a menacing wonderland of shadows hiding in hollows and swallowed stone furniture that appears suddenly in the naked shrubbery. A fountain and its decapitated cherub hold court in the very centre of the chaos, near consumed by a rosebush that sweeps around the basin and up the statue. Its thorns dig into the tender flesh of the weird grey baby. Nature has easily turned what was once a triumph of human control into its personal laboratory, where it mixes together imported ornamentals with hardy natives into strange,

twisted creations that any self-respecting gardener would rip up at the roots and throw on a fire. Long, trailing fingers scrape against the windows. Billy winces internally.

Watching over this bedlam is the gothic revivalist structure of Hawkins College. Billy whistles despite himself. While the garden might be caught in a frenzy of constant change, Hawkins College stands rigid against time. The building is at least six storeys tall, a centre structure with two wings added on either side that project back into the forest. Empty flagpoles stab up from the four corner towers of the central building. The iron clockface set above the entrance arch is stuck at seven fifteen.

But the garden has tried its best to absorb the college in its embrace. Densely established ivy dusted with confectioner's sugar climbs up the stone walls and into windows broken by vandals and drinking parties. Only the topmost floors are free of foliage, their grey blocks and white veins exposed to the air. The rest is submerged under a sea of leaves.

White quoins encase the corners, one of the few concessions to embellishment, and the same pale stone was used to build the grand archway over the central building's entrance. Billy pulls up in front of it. He and Harrington lean towards the passenger window, gazing up at the deeply recessed double doors atop the lichen-covered steps. A rusting padlock on a chain hangs around the handles, along with a limp piece of police tape that once warned people that Hawkins College is a *CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS*. Since Morell was arrested, the police quickly packed up their things and left. Billy and Harrington have the place to themselves.

Billy wants to drive away. Put the car in gear and careen out of these, speeding down the winding country roads until Hawkins College is a mere dream that fades to nothing. Deep within him an instinct screams to run, flee, turn back. Nothing good can come of being here. It might be spiritual, it might be primal, he couldn't say. It's just bloody loud.

He's also acutely aware that doing so with Harrington here to see it is not an option. And Harrington has his jaw set in a way that says he's not backing down either.

"It closed because of a scandal in '32," he explains without prompting. The story spills from him easily, a town tale that all Hawkinites know. "It got out that the principal was abusing kids and the teachers and prefects were in on it. Rumour was that if you spoke about it, even to your parents, you'd be offed. Then some girls actually died, and it got shut down."

"That so," Billy murmurs.

"Morell's grandfather ran the place. He built Asher's home too," he continues.

It makes sense. If there was ever the school of a man who built a gothic tower of a house in the middle of an Indiana prairie, this is it. Question is, why in Hawkins?

Since Harrington is in a chatty mood, Billy asks him.

He shrugs. "Dunno. I think it was a boarding school for rich girls. They get sent out here, taught to act like proper ladies, and sent out to marry rich dudes and organise charities. Out here, they can't get in trouble at parties or anything."

"Like a prison."

"Pretty much. With skirts and death threats."

"Those girls probably killed themselves to get out of here. I would."

Harrington snorts. "I'd like to see you in their uniform."

"Keep dreaming, Harrington."

The banter eases the thick, heavy atmosphere that descended on the car the moment the College came into view. A surge of courage comes over them, and they get out of the car and ascend the steps to the front doors. Written in fancy scrollwork above the double doors is an arc of Latin - *Recti Cultus Pectora Roborant*.

Neither of them even tries to translate it. They go for the padlock instead.

The padlock, despite being rusty, is sturdy and impossible to break by hand. "Should have brought my bat," Harrington complains. "It's in the back of my car." Billy turns, intent on finding some other way into the school, and hits him in the chest with the back of an open hand. "Hey!" Harrington yelps. "Oh. Who's that?"

"Who do you think?"

Morell stands at the base of the steps, in front of the Camaro. The dude must be silent as a cat because Billy didn't hear him coming. He's in a hospital gown, deathly pale, skeletal limbs exposed and trembling in the cold. His bare feet are blue. His lips are purple. Huge, yellow eyes shot through with black stare at Billy and Harrington in a hungry glee.

"He needs you," Morell rasps and grey saliva drips from the corners of his mouth. His hands come up, grasping at them, and he ascends a step. And another. And another. He moves in a jerky, uncomfortable way, as anyone would if they were half-frozen and emaciated to the point of starvation. He keeps coming.

Billy wishes Harrington had brought his bat too.

"Was the Byers kid like that?" asks Billy. He crosses his arms, watching Morell approach.

"No, this guy's way worse," Harrington replies with impressive calm. "That's gotta be the Mind Flayer inside him."

Billy nods. "Thought so."

Morell makes it to the top of the steps, coming under the archway. "He will rebuild the world with you." His voice echoes around the recessed space.

Billy and Harrington move with one mind. They split up, dodging around the madman and heading for the car. Billy drags his keys out of his pocket, jumps, slides across his hood, and lands at the driver's side, when Morell screams and leaps, clearing the entire set of steps in one bound.

What the hell?

Harrington is unprotected on the passenger side. Before Billy can move, Morell is on him, grabbing him by his fluffy hair and slamming his skull against the wing mirror. Harrington slumps into the snow, arms flopping under the Camaro.

If Billy drives away, he'll run over Harrington and condemn the guy to being the next school memorial service. If he stays . . .

Morell grins at Billy and jumps – *jumps* – onto the Camaro roof, the whole chassis shuddering under his weight. Billy swears and runs into the garden at his back.

Branches snap at him, thorns dragging along his skin, long trailing vines catch him around the ankles and try to bring him down. He keeps going, bashing his way through. There has to be something he can use as a weapon in here – some broken stick or piece of statue or anything at all. Fear, thick and throbbing, drives him further, faster, makes him want to scream. He can hear Morell hoarse panting getting closer.

By the decapitated fountain in the centre of the garden, he catches sight of a mound of stone in the undergrowth. He lunges for it, tries to lift it. It's the cherub's head. Rose thorns stab into his palms as he wrestles with the plant. Branches snap and he stumbles at its release, using the momentum to swing the head like a hammer throw –

Morell's spindly arms come around his neck and yank him off his feet. Billy's head cracks on the edge of the fountain basin. The cherub head goes flying and thumps into a snow drift.

8. The Pool

Being left alone with Nancy and Jonathan after Steve's bombshell is not how I intended to spend my afternoon. Having a crisis of faith because of D&D is not how I intended to spend *any* afternoon.

"We're here to ask you about that photo," Nancy begins. I'm taking the shortbread out of the pantry when we hear the slamming of car doors and the Camaro's unmistakeable roar.

"Is that . . . ?" Jonathan says, and I'm rushing past him, through the entrance hall, bursting onto the porch into the bracing chill to see the Camaro take a right at the end of the drive. I cast around for Steve, who's nowhere to be seen. He must be with Billy.

I know where they're going. I know why they're going. I make my decision in a moment. I step back into the house and shut the door before Nancy and Jonathan can make it onto the porch. "What's happening?" she demands.

"Nothing," I reply. "It's fine. Seriously, don't worry about them. Let's go to the kitchen, I'll explain what Steve told us."

I've avoided Morell once today. I will avoid him again. Steve and Billy can handle themselves. The police will no doubt be en route if Morell has escaped. No use me kicking up a fuss, besides I don't think I could if I tried. I have no strength left. That half hour on the prairie has sapped me. My attempts at understanding, at consolidating, were far from enlightening.

God is real. So is the devil. But a Mind Flayer? Is that the shape the devil really takes – a big shadow monster from an alternate reality that possesses kids? I guess that could be a manifestation of him. The Bible says he comes to kill, steal, and destroy, that he sends his demons to possess people and drive them mad. Maybe there's something in Revelation about this, something our current understanding of the spiritual realm doesn't include. God and His universe are too big and mysterious to be fully understood by human minds, after all. People used to think that disease came from vapours when it was really bacterial infection. Who knows? Maybe Hell is a place full of weird spores and the devil is a giant

shadow trying to take over our world.

Also, wasn't it, like, twelve-year-olds who named it the Mind Flayer? I bet the Pope, or a Tibetan monk, or someone before D&D was created, would have interpreted a giant alternate dimension monster differently. It's all a matter of context.

Thus ran the frantic pace of my thoughts as the chill set in and seeped through and I shivered until Nancy and Jonathan arrived. I slogged along the furrow I had made in the snow and a single Bible verse came to mind, and it brought comfort of a hard, absolute kind.

Everything under Heaven belongs to me.

And so consoled in a place of heavy acceptance, worn through and half-frozen, I gave up understanding and fell back on years' worth of training in friendly helpfulness, learnt from school and church and Mrs Moore. It keeps me moving without thinking too hard. Cups of peppermint tea and the shortbread Mr Smith left in my pantry are distributed. Nancy rubs Jonathan's back when they sit side by side, a move as easy as breathing. I sip tea and it burns my tongue.

First, before getting to the elephant of Billy's comment, the niceties of semi-strangers entering a person's home for the first time must be addressed.

Ahem. What's up with the haunted house vibe?

It's easy to rattle off the history of the place – built in 1882 by W.J. Morell, headmaster of Hawkins College before the scandal, bought by my parents in the fifties and restored to its late 19th century glory, yada yada yada.

I chatter about long-held and long-dismissed renovations ideas. "First I want to clear out all the downstairs rooms. I'll keep the piano and the dining room furniture. Everything else will end up in a bonfire." The armrest of the loveseat snaps in a flurry of sparks in the fireplace. "Then it will be the harder job of cleaning and sanding off the old varnish. I won't be able to paint until spring when it's warm enough for the paint to dry."

“What are you hoping to do with it once it’s renovated?” asks Nancy.

“Hope Mom and Dad don’t come back and disown me?” My chuckle is forced and they know it and I chew shortbread to push past the awkwardness. It doesn’t work. My retreat into forced hospitality is failing.

Nancy’s thin face gets more pinched. She and Jonathan share a look that I’ve seen a thousand times – the one of abject curiosity but enough social grace to know asking about my parents’ abandonment is not polite.

“It’s all right,” I dismiss. “I haven’t heard from them in years.” Ten years, yesterday, to be exact.

“I don’t think I ever met your parents,” Nancy says carefully. “They own hotels, don’t they?”

“Strange Places,” I affirm. “Novelty themed.” And very lucrative if the newspapers and magazines in the school library are telling the truth, not that I’ve ever seen a cent of it.

“What were they like?” Jonathan queries, jumping on his girlfriend’s bandwagon.

“Can’t really remember.” Distant. Cold. Spent more time talking to project managers and listening to classical music than paying attention to whatever Kato and I were doing. Kato joined debate teams and wrote essays about world politics and society’s downfall, while I went to church camps and sang in the choirs and read as many books as I could get my hands on. Our few intersections as siblings were presenting ourselves if ever guests came and expected to see the children in a family of four.

If I was unhappy, I didn’t know it. The church ladies gave me hugs and the pastors told me God had a bright future in store and the kind middle-aged men asked me whether I’d lost another tooth yet. Jermaine and I spent hours watching true crime documentaries at his house. Kato didn’t comment on my stealing books from his shelves that were too old for a child. I was eight – I was proud of my parents for working hard and trusting Kato and I to be more or less

independent despite being far too young. They were out of the house a lot, tripping around the country to find new projects. It was the way of life. No one ever told me there was anything wrong with it.

Then it did go wrong – really wrong – and there was nothing I could do about it.

I remember they left the week before Thanksgiving. Kato told me later the trip was to see an old hotel in the Rockies, built in the twenties but left to decay because of the rash of unfortunate accidents on the property. It was a step up from their usual ventures in old property restorations, which had been focused on private homes up to then. Being eight, this meant nothing to me. What mattered was that their trip kept going, and going, and going.

Thanksgiving was spent with the Moores. Christmas came and went, marked only by my singing in the church choir for the morning service. I missed the church New Year's party and Kato was in Indianapolis with his friends. As the clock ticked past midnight into 1975, I huddled in a cocoon of blankets and listened to Mom and Dad's old house groan. Something terrible must have happened to them. The hotel collapsed, they're trapped in rubble, snow tumbling upon the debris and freezing their bodies and they will be trapped, like cavemen, to be unearthed a hundred years later by journalists.

That was the night I first believed they died in those blasted Rockies. I have believed it with half my heart ever since, despite glossy six-page spreads in *Restoration Digest*.

We received a letter a few days into January that Kato abruptly burned, along with every photo of my parents – and there weren't many, it wasn't in keeping with the house's aesthetic to have family portraits on the walls – and locked the doors on the second floor. "They're not coming back," he told me.

"Are they dead?" I whispered.

"It would be better if they were."

He never expanded on that and his look of loathing stopped me ever asking. I unlocked the second floor bedroom door once, a week after

he left, to collect some of our mother's clothes, and then relocked it and never went back in.

Time kept ticking. Mr Smith came with our groceries. Jermaine Clutha's parents, or the Moores, or Kato, with our father's abandoned VW Beetle, gave me rides to school and to church until I was strong enough to bike the fifteen miles. On the face of it, not much changed besides me learning to do the washing and the cooking and the cleaning a little earlier than my classmates, and the Moores told the old chief of police that they would keep an eye on us, and then Hopper when he arrived in '76. The biggest change was when the Moores hit eighty in 1979 and the routine switched from them coming to ours after church to me going to theirs. Just me. Kato had debating tournaments most weekends.

Four years passed, Kato was eighteen, had a scholarship to Harvard, and hated the house, hated Hawkins, hated everything. He hated it all so much, he drove the Beetle nine-hundred and thirty-three miles to Cambridge and never came back. He told me I would be fine, that the Moores would take care of me, that I was happier in Hawkins anyway, with my church and my school and Jermaine Clutha. That I'd been too young to remember Mom and Dad properly, so it wasn't the same for me as it was for him.

But I remember you.

No letter came. No phone call. I locked his room and half-believed he crashed the Beetle somewhere in Ohio or Pennsylvania or Connecticut or the steps of Harvard and six years have passed and I wonder if I am dead too, sometimes.

Maybe there is a noose in our attic and I used it years back and I'm the ghost of the haunted house and if I faded away and disappeared it would be as natural a thing as the seasons turning, the sun sliding across the sky, as old ideas vanishing in the face of the new. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. Not with a bang but a whimper.

Billy won't fade. He's the fire and the storm of Mount Sinai, he's life in all its intensity distilled into flesh. While I haunt my black mansion and let Jermaine cover up my walls and stare at death in guilt's leaden grip, he screams and fights and carves a place in the universe

where he is undeniable. He's the most alive person I've ever met.

I sigh and sip my tea and sigh again because the cracked mug is empty and my tongue is raw and I am, as ever, alone.

Apart from God, comes the old refrain, but it doesn't bring the comfort, that welling of peace in my spirit, and that's the worst part of all this. He might be Ruler of All, but I want my *Abba*-Father.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.

"Asher? Asher, the phone."

"Oh. One moment." I swallow the glutinous mouthful of shortbread I've been rolling around in my mouth and head into the entrance hall. The hysterical cry of the phone echoes around the house, bounces off the rails and clanging against the ceiling. It's a relief to cut it off. "Hello?"

"Ash-er?" The young voice breaks my name into two hesitant syllables.

"Yes? Who is this?"

"Eleven."

I balk, swear internally, glance at the ceiling and think, *Everything under Heaven includes psychic girls made from MK-Ultra, right?*

". . . Oh," I say.

"Billy's in trouble. He needs help."

I have enough wit to castigate myself. *I should have gone after them.*

"What kind of trouble?"

"He's been taken. Bad man. Yellow eyes. Looks like a *skel-ling-ton*." She says this last word slowly, testing it out, and I've figured out who she's talking about before she pronounced the last syllable.

"Where are they?"

“It’s green and wet and . . . gross.”

I should have guessed. “Is Steve there too?”

“Yes.”

“What is Morell doing to them?”

“The – green – is – moving,” she explains haltingly and clearing up nothing.

Oh-kay. “Right, thanks. Nancy and Jonathan are with me and we’ll go get Billy.”

“What did she say?” comes from the kitchen, Nancy whispering to Jonathan.

“Can you let the chief know what’s happening?” I continue, mindful of my guests coming into the entrance hall, watching.

“You don’t need him.”

I frown and hold up a hand to Nancy and Jonathan when she makes motions to speak. “I think we will,” I tell Eleven. “If Morell has them, then he will need to be put back in prison.”

“You will be enough.”

“Me?”

“The blue says so.”

Click.

Dial tone.

“What’s going on?” Nancy demands.

“That was El,” I reply, placing the weighty handset on its hooks.

“*What?*”

The blue says so? Is the blue like the moving green?

Confusion and are fear mingling, stealing my clarity, as I frown at the pale rectangle where W.J. Morell used to be and remember his grandson those crazed, black-veined eyes and his hands at my throat, gripping tighter. He must have some heavy duty drugs at work in him, to turn his veins black and get the jump on Steve, Billy, Tyler, Mikey, and Joe . . .

Oh.

“Asher!” Nancy appears in front of me. “What’s going on?”

Four minutes and one very hurried summary of Steve and El’s words, we’re gunning it towards the eastern pine stand.

“Superhuman strength and black veins. It has to be him. How is he back!? El closed the gate!”

“I don’t know! Will better be safe. I should have rung home, checked on him, but he’ll be at the arcade.”

He and Nancy carry on their one-sided conversations with each other, grim, serious expressions. I can see the glint of memory in Jonathan’s eyes through the rear vision mirror. It’s what I expect to see in a veteran’s face – have seen in articles on vets coming back from Vietnam. Their voices are capped with steel, tempered in disillusionment. Soldiers heading to the front lines once more, facing the next wave from an old enemy.

I’m in the backseat, gripping my seatbelt with both hands and sinking. It’s getting harder to stay present. Twelve and three, face down, being absorbed by the algae and the muck to become of that ghastly ecosystem that had taken over the lowest floor of the College’s east wing. A blue coat and fluffy hair and a fading black eye and a smirk that’s seen the world and finds it ridiculous, and they’re sinking too. Please, God, don’t let them die. Don’t take anymore from me, not this time.

I can’t ignore the sour taste of doubt in the back of my throat.

The pine stand swallows us and tall, dead-looking trunks march by in endless columns. “Everything under Heaven,” I murmur, the syllables

condensing and fuzzing and the world beyond the car blurs. “Everything under Heaven.” Drops of water beads together and run in rivulets down the glass, slicing through the haze. On the other side is the manic garden of Hawkins College.

Please, please.

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“Hargrove. Hargrove, you asshole, wake up.”

Billy groans. “Geez, drop the Hargrove thing already, would you? It reminds me of my old man.” He jerks his head forward, off Steve’s shoulder and nearly swoons in the effort, black swarming over his vision. It takes a few moments for the fuzz to retreat and for the weird, moist world to come into view. He wishes it hadn’t – he could have lived an entire lifetime without seeing this cave of mould and moss and the stagnant water. But he can’t pass out again, not with the stench of rot acting like smelling salts.

He and Steve are tied back to back, the pool between them and the main doors. There are locker room doors off to the side and high windows that let in grey light that does nothing more than feed the vegetation. This is beyond foul. Every time he breathes, he feels as if he’s sucking down a miasma of bacteria. “Where’s he brought us?” he says in disgust. What are they sitting in? Billy shoves that thought out of his mind as soon as it appears but now he can’t ignore the frigid water seeping into his jeans.

“I think – I think this is the place where they found Joe and Mikey.”

Because of course it is. “What’s he doing?”

Steve looks towards the locker rooms. There, gripping the cracking, stained edge of the pool, Morell leans forward to gaze into the murk. He speaks in a manic whisper that the algal water soaks up before it reaches Billy and Steve. If Billy didn’t know any better, he’d say the psycho was praying. He’s acting like some sort of skeletal seer.

“Think the pool’s gonna tell him to let us go?” says Steve in an attempt at levity.

Billy’s head hurts too much to try and match him. “Don’t get your hopes up,” he slurs. “He’s going to chuck us in.”

“Aren’t you a ray of sunshine? How’s your head?”

“How’d you know?” Billy might be feeling nauseous and rattled, but he has enough of his wits to remember that Steve was unconscious before Billy’s head got slammed into a fountain.

“You bled all over my shoulder.”

“Oh.” Should he apologise? He’s aware of Steve’s warmth against his back, of every shift of muscle, the old rope around their chests binding them together. He’s also become *Steve*, not Harrington, and Billy puts that down to his fuzzy, messed up thinking and not the fact that Steve isn’t such a bad guy to be stuck in this bloody pool with. Better than his Cali mates or Tommy Hagan.

Why not? Now’s as good a time as any. “I’m sorry for beating your face in.”

Steve doesn’t reply and Billy realises he hasn’t listened. He’s been watching Morell. “The pool’s glowing,” Steve hisses.

It is. Bluey-white lights move under the top layer of algae and throw weird, shifting silhouettes on the walls and ceiling. Bioluminescent bacteria? Deep sea fish? The Mind Flayer? Anything’s possible. Morell’s eyes shine in rapture.

Moss doesn’t do that, Billy thinks. All over the room the moss is converging, twisting into vines that emerge from the algae and spread across the tiles and up the walls and through the high windows. Billy wouldn’t believe his eyes, but he can *hear* them moving, with a horrible squelching sound that makes him want to throw up. Where the moss drags itself into creating a vine, luminescent spores explode into the air. Soon the whole room is full of them, floating and spinning around each other like so many tiny galaxies.

The moss under Steve and Billy shifts. It breaks apart and slides into vines on either side of them. The glistening creepers are as thick as Billy's leg.

"Oh, God, not again," Steve moans. The rope pulls tight around Billy. Steve is trying to break free. It's not going to work. Morell used the same length of rope for their chests, ankles, and wrists, creating a binding as effective as a straitjacket. Unless Steve turns out to be a talented contortionist, they're not getting out of this one. Besides, that blow to the back of the head has drained Billy of his strength, he couldn't make a run for it if he tried. Typical. The moment his life starts turning around, he's helpless again, at the mercy of a madman, and probably going to die.

Morell stands up at last. He walks across the tiles, stepping over the vines in the absent-minded way of a sleepwalker. "He's ready for you," he says.

The green pool *heaves*.

.

"I wish I had my camera right now," says Jonathan. All three of them have to pause to take in the monstrosity of Hawkins College. My watch tells me it's only just past three, and yet darkness is falling, the sky quickly dimming. The wind is picking up too, the temperature dropping fast. This is blizzard weather. In *November*.

"Not the time, Jonathan," says Nancy. Both of them are steady, brave in the face of danger. Nancy has a gun Jonathan kept in his glovebox. He has the nail bat they took from the trunk of Steve's car. The Camaro is a few feet away, parked directly in front of the steps of the school and abandoned. Trails in the snow lead from the side of the car and out from the depths of the garden and head towards the east wing.

I press my hands to my face and pretend I have courage. I've been

here before. I saved Tyler. I'm not alone. I can do this.

There's a demonic creature trying to take over the world and it's possessed Morell and is using him to kill young men for some plan to rebuild the world.

I can't do this.

What waits inside, Mind Flayer, demon, devil, whatever it is, I don't believe I can defeat it. Even with Nancy and Jonathan wielding their weapons and El's *You will be enough* I don't believe.

But Billy's in there. I'm sick of losing people.

I heft the petrol container and the lighter that are to be my weapons, found in the generator hutch and the kitchen drawer respectively. I don't pray. *Everything under Heaven belongs to me.* If so, then whatever happens next belongs to Him too.

"Let's go," I say. "There's a bridge around the side. We can get to the pool from there."

We run, past a bench smothered by a monstrous azalea and past the massive white quoins, around the side of the main building where a rusting fire escape leads from the top storey all the way to the cracking cobbles. The east wing stretches out before us, thrusting into the forest. We find the break between the wings where a bridge connects them at the second storey. At the other end of the small alley is a glimpse of the white tundra of the quadrangle, where girls once ate lunches and played games and escaped from the stone and their headmaster for a few precious minutes in the sun. It's a desolate plain now, and the trails of Steve and Billy's feet take a right at the end of the alley and skirt the edge of the east wing. There must be another entrance to the pool that way, unless Steve and Billy aren't in the pool at all.

"Wait here," I murmur, and I scurry around to the corner of the alley and peer across the quadrangle. The wind is blocked by the main building here and a plain of lumpen white stretches from one wing to the other, hiding the weeds and rubbish and leaf litter that has accumulated over the years. Over by the west wing, the old science

block, whole desks have been thrown through the windows to crash upon the paving stones. By the east wing, the twin lines made by Steve and Billy's feet scrape along the length of the building before disappearing into the furthest door. Into the pool.

I pull back and relay the details to Nancy and Jonathan.

Nancy debates for two seconds, then decides, "We use the bridge. We don't want to spring a trap if Morell's set one."

The metal rubbish bin I used as a step the last time I came here is still in place under the bridge. Nancy goes first, then Jonathan after he tosses the bat up to her, and finally me after they relieve me of the petrol for a minute. It's an easy climb, grasping the freezing bars and railing and vaulting over onto the rotting wood of the bridge. The whole thing creaks. The door into the east wing is ajar.

I lead the way, clicking on the flashlight that I've been given ownership of. Considering I've been here before and that in a moment of sudden danger, Nancy and Jonathan with their melee weapons need both hands to react faster, it makes sense for me to carry it. Me uncapping a petrol can lid, tossing the foul liquid on the assailant, then trying to get close enough to set them on fire with a stove-top lighter while not doing the same to myself is not a first-attack plan.

Panic makes us speed walk through the obstacle course of the long hallway – we crunch over the threads of ivy creeping from room to room, and jump the fallen portraits of intimidating men and women whose names have been forgotten, and skirt the chairs and desks and shelves that vandals have thrown from the classrooms. Graffiti appears in shocking technicolour in the flashlight's beam. It's as cold within as it is outside, just how I remember it from Saturday night, though there is a tad more light to see by coming in through the windows of the empty classrooms. Nancy and Jonathan stick as close to me as they can, weapons at the ready.

Then comes the narrow stairs. It's like stepping into some dead monster's throat – dank and close and smelling almost of flesh. It's mould and dust and damp, I know, but I can't stop my mind running wild. The smell gets stronger the further we descend and starts to

coat my tongue. We drown in it. Breath rasping, we reach the corridor that leads to the pool and hear Billy and Steve hollering to high heaven. A strange blue glow emits from the windows of the pool doors and spills through the corridor. That wasn't there last time.

Is this the blue that told El I would be enough? Has she led us into a trap?

Every fibre in my body says to run. That to go into that pool means death, and though I know death means going home, I am shaking. I don't want to die. God, please, don't let me die.

"Just fucking try it!" Billy screams and is cut off with a strangled yelp.

Jonathan and Nancy sprint for the doors, me hot on their heels, and we burst in the grotto of the pool. Billy and Steve are there, on the other side of the pool, Morell's hands tight on Billy's throat. All three look over at us. In the dim, the blood pouring from the back of Billy's head is black and thick and stains his mullet. And yet that tableau is not what makes me gasp.

"Not again," says Nancy.

I immediately slap my hand over my mouth and nearly brain myself with the flashlight. Strange, glowing spores swirl around us and batter our faces. They do not look healthy, nor does the creature rising out of the pool.

No doubt Dustin or Mike or Will or Lucas would have some D&D name for this thing – Cthulhu or Kraken or whatever. I'm more inclined to Eleven's explanation – the moving green.

The algae has somehow coalesced into a monster of vines and blue light and dripping slime that squats in the pool. It hears Nancy and slides towards us, sucking up more blooms of algae as it approaches. The pool ripples and sloshes at the movement and sends up the smell of the mould and damp and dust and a hundred other throat-searing, choking odours that lodge in my lungs and nose and the backs of my eyes and refuse to move. I hack into my sleeve, eyes streaming. I look down.

“The vines!” I cry, voice breaking.

Too late. The vines hook around Jonathan and Nancy’s ankles and yank them off their feet. They scream. Nancy’s head cracks on the tiles, knocking her out instantly. I leap for her, fumbling and letting go of the petrol can, but the vines are too fast. They whip Nancy and Jonathan away to either side of the pool and haul them up the walls where more vines circle around their ankles, their waists, their throats, and hold them there. Jonathan shouts obscenities and the vine at his throat tightens until he’s silent. Another crushes his wrist. The nail bat clatters to the floor. Other vines twitch and send both the bat and the dropped gun skittering into the pool water.

An acrid scent makes me grimace. The petrol can popped its lid and its contents spill onto the floor and over my boots, useless except to make me light headed. There goes that plan. Not that it would have worked, really. It’s too damp in here, the air too foul and torpid. A fire would be a miracle.

Water slops over the edge of the pool and mingles with the petrol. The monster is here.

It looms, higher and higher, pool water spilling off it as it grows into a mound of green and glowing blue. The unearthly light emits from deep within it and pierces through areas of thinner algae and sludge, yet it has no face, no eyes that I can see. Waves of freezing, stinking air flow from it and chill me to the bone. I shiver so hard I drop the flashlight. My teeth chatter against my cuff.

Is this evil? The paralysis, the cold, the sheer weight of the terror that blows all rational thought from your mind?

I can feel its polluted desire to destroy, to kill and kill and kill until everything is ruined and bitter and lifeless. And I know, as its glow brightens and I am so afraid I cannot breathe, that there must be a God. For surely this beast is the Devil.

Two stories, told many years ago in Sunday school, pop up unbidden – one of Daniel and his friends walking in the furnace with an angel. The other of Elijah calling the fire of God down to burn up the sodden wood on the altar and even the water in the trench around it.

“Asher, run!” Billy croaks through Morell’s constricting fingers.

I fumble in my pocket and bring out the lighter and flick on its tiny yellow flame on the third try, a hint of blue sparking at its base. The vines react instantly and whip towards me and the ghastly emissary of the enemy throws itself forward, its dripping arms reaching towards me –

I drop the lighter in the petrol puddle at my feet.

9. Stranger Danger

“So . . .” Steve pipes up from the driver’s seat. “We going to talk about what the hell happened back there?”

The petrol caught fire, that’s what happened. There was a lot of fire, all of it blue. The vines whipped about in a frenzy as the flames spread along them and over the moss and slid off the edge into the pool that bubbled and frothed in the heat. Then *whoomph*, the sodden algae was alight. The creature flailed, splashing the foul water on the fire to no avail. The flames burrowed through its blanket of moving green and bit into the glowing centre. It screamed. Morell shrieked for his master. He left Billy and Steve and dove into the muck of the pool headfirst. The blazing algae closed over him in an instant. He never surfaced.

It was peripheral that I saw Nancy and Jonathan drop to the floor, he unscathed and bewildered overcoming the shock through long experience to leapt to his unconscious girlfriend’s aid. I jumped over the shrivelling, crumbling vines to untie Billy and Steve. Not one wisp of smoke entered our lungs, not one lick of fire scorched our clothes. We raced out through the locker rooms onto the quadrangle. The east wing burned blue and bright and the crushing weight of evil lifted and though Morell is dead and that *thing* was real, I feel weightless, released. I should be praying in an attitude of reflection and thankfulness. In fact, I’m trying to stop myself from succumbing to giggles.

“I bet it was El,” Steve is saying and I click back into the here and now and sharp sobriety cuts into my thinking. “You said she called you guys to pick us up, so she must have done it from a distance or something.”

I don’t correct him, don’t know how I can correct him, when what I’m feeling is so much deeper than words. My perception of the world has shifted, like a veil has been lifted from my eyes and the nature of reality is open to me – a thin layer held in His palm, upon which we walk and talk and exist in our human ignorance to His true power. There is nothing that can stop Him. All the rules of our lives, from the hardness of stone to the way oxygen is collected through our

lungs and hooks onto to haemoglobin to our primal sense of good and evil, all of it is completely dependent on Him. He could, at a moment's notice, change everything. We'd never know. He could make it so we were happy with the change, or oblivious, or that we never even existed. He could, if he wanted, remake all reality into something utterly different to our universe. Why *this* way? Why not some other Earth, covered in goop and populated by blob fish as the alpha species?

I do giggle at that.

"What?" says Billy.

"Nothing, don't worry about it. Uhm, I'll check you again properly when we get home. It's too hard in here."

He grunts and turns and gingerly touches the nape of his neck, near the open wound that still seeps into his hair. I wanted him to go to hospital with Nancy and Jonathan. He refused right out. The only compromise I could get was for Steve to drive the Camaro.

Steve took the keys from Billy's hand with a tad more relish and grinning than was appropriate while Hawkins College was slowly incinerated by unearthly fire a few feet away and Morell drowned or burned or was unmade.

We emerge from the safety of the trees into a world of white. The prairie is smothered in it, and it smashes into the Camaro in gusts that scream over the bonnet and strip the snow away before it can settle. The whole car shakes. Steve swears and slows to a crawl, fighting the wind that wants to blow us off the road.

"You okay?" Billy mutters under the storm, quieter than Steve can hear.

"No. You?"

"Not even slightly."

Steve manages to find the drive and turn onto it. My house is good for one thing – it's hard to miss a four-storey black shadow even in a blizzard, especially when I apparently forgot to turn the lights off. It

gets the worst of the storm too, the arctic wind tearing down the north hills and smashing into the front of the house.

“My car,” Steve moans. A wintery dune by the porch, his BMW is more snow-drift than vehicle by this point.

Billy and I are more interested in the huge four by four. Steve pulls up between the snow-drift and the off-roader and Billy and I peer through his window at the hulking machine. It’s dark body is lifted high off the ground and its wheels are half as tall as the Camaro. I’ve never seen it before.

“Whose is that?” he asks.

“No idea,” I say.

“Whoever they are, they’re loaded. That sort of custom work isn’t cheap.”

The beast sends a shiver down my spine. The cab’s windows are dark and from the build up around the wheels, they’ve been here for a while.

A shiver runs down my spine. The second floor lights are on.

“You stay here,” says Billy.

“What?” Steve twists around to stare at him. “You’re not going out there alone.”

“You gonna be my sidekick, Indiana?” Billy shoots back.

“Don’t want to explain to Max why I let her brother freeze to death, Cali.”

“*Step*-brother.”

“You need to learn how to build healthy relationships.”

“Sure, I’ll get right on that once you move on from Nancy Wheeler.”

I open the door and throw myself into the storm.

The whole world is angry. Stinging pinpricks batter into my face, my hands, my eyes, trying to push me down, down, down, into the frozen powder where it will bury me inch by inch until I am part of it, a victim of its power. This is not a usual storm – it digs its fingers under my scarf and down my back and around my chest where it closes like a vice. It's so cold I can't breathe. The very air strips the warmth from my lungs and replaces it with sandpaper.

The snow is up to my ankles, the gravel underneath slick and crystalline. One step at a time, arms wrapped around my ribs. Head down. The snow is piling thicker and thicker on the frozen porch steps and against the front of the house. The cars' headlights turn off. My lighthouse is the sliver of light around the front door.

"Hey!" Billy shouts over the howling. He and Steve crunch after me, swearing at the blistering temperature. "What the hell is wrong with this place!?" He yelps. A particularly strong gust sends him skidding across the floorboards into the door. Steve laughs, then swears because it hurts to laugh out here.

The door opens and Billy tumbles inside into swinging golden light. "Get inside!" yells the opener.

I shove Steve into the entrance hall and the door is forced to shut. The wind stops battering us but the sound of the storm doesn't and it wants to come inside too – it rattles the windows around the frame and squeezes through the gap under the door and hammers against the front of the house in great, pounding screams. Its prey has been taken and it's not happy. We stand in the entrance hall in the trembling light of the chandelier, listening for a moment to the groans of the old house.

"This place can handle a storm, right?" asks Steve.

"It has survived over a hundred years on this plain," says the man who let us in. He is, in a word, distinguished. Tall, slim, handsome. Greying at the temples, lines in his forehead from frowning in academic thought. He wears an immaculate pinstriped grey suit that makes him seem even larger than his 6'2 height already does, and shiny, shiny shoes, in no way made for a blizzard. From the gold tie clip and gold suspender clasps and gold signet ring on the fourth

finger of his right hand, he simply exudes wealth and power and Steve looks at him with hushed awe and Billy is openly sceptical of his very existence. The businessman brushes off a few snowflakes before they can melt into the merino wool. He adjusts his suspenders and puts his hands in the pockets of his pressed slacks.

It's hard to equate this with the Roy Orbison in the ice box.

At least he's not really dead. And where he is, Mom cannot be far away. In fact, I can hear the kettle whistling in the kitchen, the cups being taken from the shelf.

Two paths pave themselves before me, and walking one of them will bring strife and pain and bitterness, without a hope of closure.

I take the other path and smile and say with calm and the buoyancy that fills me like a balloon, "Hi, Dad. What are you doing here?"

I didn't know I got my eyes from him, the green with the smudge of blue. He frowns at me. "Where have you been?" he asks. "We went by the school but they said you were out."

"Uh," I glance at Steve, at Billy, and they're no help at all. Steve is distinctly uncomfortable and Billy is distinctly murderous. The grandfather clock set beside the dining room door reads a quarter to four. Lord, sorry about this. "There was a memorial for two boys who died. I, well, I wasn't feeling up to going. Steve and Billy brought me home."

"Whose car is that outside?"

"Mine," says Steve.

"It looks like it's been out a long time," my dad says, probing, sceptical, and I figure that even in trying to avoid confrontation, I don't have to put up with my father who left ten years ago interrogating me or my friends. One of whom is looking like he wants to hit my father with the telephone. And from that expression, Dad's just noticed that Billy's coat is rather familiar.

"What are you doing here?" I ask again.

My father stops analysing Billy and Steve and finding them wanting and turns to me. His eyes soften, somewhat, barely, it might be a trick of the light. "The Moores told us about the intruder. We're here to make sure you're okay."

"She's fine," Billy slurs. His eyes are fluttering, unfocused. "You're welcome. Get the hell out of her house, bastard."

"Excuse me—" my father begins, and I cut across him before this gets any worse.

"Steve, can you get Billy cleaned up? There's a bathroom on the third floor, a first aid kit under the sink. I'll have food ready for him when you're done." I plead with him silently. Please, if anything will make this harder it's a concussed Billy Hargrove.

"Yeah, sure," says Steve slowly. He takes Billy by the arm and drags him up the stairs. Their faltering footsteps and voices echo through the house. "Come on, move it, I'm not carrying you up the stairs."

"You're dead if you try," says Billy, and he laughs hard and loud and then there's a thump on the second floor landing. "I'm gonna kill you for that." His voice is distorted, as if his mouth is squashed.

"Yeah, yeah," Steve grunts, "get going."

A few moments later, the bathroom door opens, Billy shouts, "I'm not going in there, it's cold!" and then the door closes. Plumbing thumps in the walls as the tap is turned on.

"Who are they?" he demands.

"Friends." I go into the kitchen. "Hi, Mom."

She's changed her hair. It used to be long and flowing, curling down her back like Sleeping Beauty. It's short and sleek and coiffed, all the better to show off the big gold earrings and elegant line of her neck. If my father is the epitome of American businessman, my mother is the epitome of the businesswoman, feminine and imposing in the same instant. Her shoulder pads and grey pinstripes are so different to the knitted sweater I wear from her wardrobe, I wonder if she even remembers her teenaged self.

"Hello, Asher," she greets, flicking her gaze to me, amused at the sight of her wool pants belted at my waist, and then returns to filling the silver enamel teapot. The scent of earl grey tea blossoms, joining the thicker woodsmoke and melted varnish from the ashen chair legs in the grate. They've added another log to the fire.

"Kato sends his regards," Mom continues. "He's in the midst of his studies. Final year of undergrad is a trying time."

I wouldn't know. You never told me about yours.

My father crosses the linoleum and sits at the table. Despite having designed this room, he's out of place in it. So is she. The hanging pots, the great black stove, the shelves of cups and saucers and plates set above the icebox, none of it matches their cut-diamond modernity. My father seems to realise it too. He looks about himself as if seeing this room for the first time and is displeased.

"I'll be glad when this place is sold," he says. "It's always been a black mark in the portfolio, hasn't it?"

I blink. "Sold?"

"Sit down, Asher," my mother orders, "don't just stand there."

I pull out the chair and sit, in a dream. I've imagined so many scenarios of their return, where they disown me or profess their love or grovel for forgiveness. Never, in all my fantasies, have I imagined them selling the house. Another layer of my reality is pulled out from under me, this one a lot more personal and more upsetting for it.

There's a crash and a yelp and a laugh upstairs and it jolts me. I straighten, strengthen, think of Hawkins College. "Why do you want to sell it?" I ask coolly.

Mom pushes my cup of tea across my kitchen table. She's using the fine china that I never touch except on the weekly clean. My favourite mug, painted with sunflowers, remains on the shelf.

"There's a certain level of interest garnered when a house has a history," she explains. "A friend of ours is interested in buying it and Hawkins College, turning them into a joint museum of sorts.

Though,” here her mouth twists, “we will need the paintings and furniture back in the rooms. What have you done with them?”

She seems to think turning me out after ten years of estrangement is a non-issue. Like I’m a housekeeper hired to care for their master’s property in their absence. Sorry, we just don’t like the old place anymore, we’re sure you will find a suitable position elsewhere. Incredulous, I have no regret in admitting, “Billy burned them.”

Dad sits up. Mom puts the cup on its saucer with a clatter. “What?”

“It’s part of his community service,” I explain, and I nudge the earl grey away. I’ve never liked it. I keep it for Mr Smith. “He saved my life when Morell broke in. Jim Hopper had him stick around, he said decided it wouldn’t be good for me to be alone after a home invasion.” *Where were you? I keep to myself. Why didn’t you call to check if I was all right, instead of turning up out of the blue and tossing me to the curb?* “He’s the blonde one,” I say to Dad. “The other guy is Steve. Billy beat him up a few weeks ago and he has to do community service because of it, so he’s here for the next month. Renovating.”

“Renovating,” my mother breathes in horror.

“That violent boy is alone with you, in this house, on Hopper’s orders?” My father slams his hands on the table. “This is unacceptable!”

“Billy’s fine.” I have to stop myself rolling my eyes. “He had a screwed up dad, that’s all. Now that he’s in prison, Billy’s free to enjoy life properly.”

“His father is in prison?” Mom presses a hand to her chest. “Asher, it’s dangerous for him to be here. You should have known better.”

And who was here to teach me that? Not you, that’s for sure.

I find myself observing them as if from a distance, detached from their internal logic and warped social standards that make them think I am obligated to them. Their shock and disapproval does not touch me.

"Don't sell the house," I tell them. "Or, at least not until I've graduated. I'm going to Yale, you know. I have a scholarship."

"Sorry," says my father. "I doubt our buyer will wait that long."

"Besides," Mom leans forward over her cup, a pretty curl to her lips. "Wouldn't you like to be out of Hawkins? We have a lovely hotel in New Orleans in the French Quarter and there's a room with your name on it. Or you can stay with Kato in Cambridge, he says he's willing to have you while you finish high school there. Then you can go to . . . Yale, was it? And you never have to see Hawkins again."

"Good riddance," says my father and he throws back the cup of tea, gets up, and goes into the scullery. "Ah hah." He pulls down a bottle of scotch hiding on a shelf behind the laundry powder that I never touched. He pours it into his teacup and takes a sip and nods in approval. My mother clicks her tongue and takes more tea.

I am tempted to yell at them. I don't. They are not worth the effort and it won't change their minds.

"I need to stay here," I say at last.

"You can't, I'm afraid," says Dad.

"I don't want to leave Hawkins."

My mother starts, as if the idea has never crossed her mind. "Why not?"

"My friends are here. School . . ." I admit something I didn't know was true until this moment. "Besides, I like this house. I don't care that Morell broke in, I want to stay."

Dad shakes his handsome head in open dismissal. "You've never been anywhere else, that's your problem. Go to New Orleans and get some culture in you."

"Nine months and I'll be in New Haven and you can sell the place then."

Dad spears me with those green eyes with the smudge of blue that

are mine but so much harder and says, "No. We're selling. You're leaving. That's final. We're not leaving you here with some hack of a police chief who lets murderers roam free."

"Asher," says Mom, and she reaches across and takes my hand in her perfect, pale fingers that have never seen a hard day's work, that don't have the callouses from an axe or burns from the stove. I don't believe in the gesture. It's as crafted as her hair. "This is our way of apologising for leaving you here."

If I was tempted before, it's *really* hard not to explode now. Gosh, there's barely an ounce of repentance in her. Imagine if they had stayed to influence me over the past ten years and made me as callous and business-driven as them. I am quite glad they left, if this is who they are. In their absence I had the Moores and Miss Davidson and Jermaine Clutha's parents, who are quite lovely even if their son isn't, to learn from. I have not been distorted by their ideals like Billy has by Neil's fist. And if they were here, I never would have relied on God, never would have seen a supernatural fire burn through evil, and never would have met Billy.

I look from one to the other, these faces that are familiar and yet strangers. I smile, a little sadly, thinking of all those dreams I'd had if they'd stayed and been different people. Then I pick up those thoughts and send them flying up the chimney to be blasted away by the storm. I pull my hand out of hers.

"I forgive you for leaving," I say, and Dad breathes in sharply. Mom's lips thin. "You had your reasons. I don't need to know why. What I know is that since then, I've made friends," *some more recently than others*, "and I've learnt how to take care of myself and I'm okay. You don't have to worry about me. You can focus on building your hotels and Kato can keep studying and I can stay here until I go to Yale. Morell doesn't need to change anything."

Mom's eyes narrow. "Is this because of that boy? What's he done to you?"

I laugh. "Gosh, Mom, Billy hasn't done a thing except keep me company. He's a friend."

“Whose father is in prison,” Dad mutters.

“Yes, which is a *good thing* because Neil Hargrove was awful and Billy deserves better than him.”

“Like Asher deserves better than you.” Billy walks into the kitchen and goes straight for the fridge where the sandwiches are. He unwraps one under the scowling eyes of my parents and grins, animated and on the hunt. His hair is damp, my dad’s bloodied coat swapped for Kato’s brown wool dressing gown. He looks gorgeous. “Billy Hargrove,” he says. “I’m the one who put your stuff in a bonfire.”

I look to Steve, lingering in the doorway. The guy raises his hands in surrender as if to say, *you try stopping him*. He’s stolen Kato’s clothes too, a sweater instead of the blood-stained puffer.

Dad’s gaze goes as cold as the roaring blizzard. “I see.”

“May I say, sir, ma’am” Billy says around his sandwich, “that I think you’re bastards for leaving your daughter? My father might be a asshole who beats me black and blue but at least he stuck around. Whereas you abandoned your own daughter in this haunted hell of a mansion with a brother who split as soon as he could and you never even got in contact. Now that’s downright wrong.”

I check how my mother is taking this.

Not well. It’s amazing how ugly anger makes a person.

My father is rising from his chair and if I didn’t believe in the love of God quite so much, I might have sat back and let events take their course. Five foot eight, in a dressing gown, and concussed, I’ll always put my money on Billy Hargrove versus Roger Strange.

Turns out, I don’t have to do a thing to intervene. There’s a thump that isn’t the plumbing. It’s the front door blasting open and then slamming shut hard enough to shake the house and we start, Dad straightens, his chair clattering to the floor. Steve turns in the threshold and says, “What brings you here, Chief? Hi, El.”

Steve over to lean on the icebox and Jim Hopper and a curly-haired

girl in a plaid jacket, covered in snow and noses pink, arrive in the kitchen. The girl shakes the snow from her hair. She points a finger at my father and declares, "See? Bad."

"How about that? She is psychic," Billy draws.

Upon seeing the poor girl who has Benny and Barb and Bob's blood on her hands because of the government's lunacy, all I can think is, *Huh. She's cute.*

"Hey, we don't call strangers bad," Hopper admonishes lightly. "Danielle, Roger, I heard you were in town. Good to finally meet you." He reaches across the table and shakes my father's hand, and from my father's twitch in his eye, Hopper's grip is tighter than it needs to be. They are the same height, I note, yet Hopper doesn't use shoulder pads to make himself look bigger. He makes my father look small.

"Chief Hopper," says my father. "What do we owe the pleasure?"

"Oh, I'm here to check up on Billy and Asher, see how they're getting on in the blizzard," El has this tight little smile on her face as she watches Hopper chatter away. If I had any doubts about those adoption papers, they've disappeared at that expression.

"I heard you two were in town. What brings you back to Hawkins?" He sounds welcoming, thumbs hooked in his belt loops, every inch the genial small town sheriff.

"Mr Hopper," says my mother. "You were the one who ordered this delinquent to destroy my home, weren't you?" She points at Billy, standing by the fridge, entertained by the proceedings.

Hopper raises an eyebrow. "Your home?"

"Yes, *my* home."

Hopper's easy-going smile wanes and his voice drops, the faux friendliness switched off. "I would think, considering she's lived here for the past ten years and you haven't so much as stepped foot on the property in that time, this would count as Asher's home by now."

My father plants both hands on the table, leans forward, and demands, "What?"

Hopper, when he glares, is terrifying. It's the eyebrows, I bet. And the beard. And Hopper himself.

"According to squatters rights in Indiana state law, if a person occupies a home without paying rent for over a decade, they can take ownership. Now," he tugs off his beanie and smacks it against his thigh, removing the snowflakes sticking to the wool, "there is the issue that a squatter is defined as someone who lives here without the permission of the landlord, and the fact that she's a family member, which means she can't make an adverse possession claim. However, considering you *did* wilfully abandon your underage daughter along with her underage brother, and made no attempt at continued contact with either siblings, a case can be made for child abuse through gross negligence which can see you jailed for, oh . . ." He strokes his beard in thought. Billy, Steve, and El watch him with hero-worship in their eyes. "Not sure. I know a few judges who tend to play hardball with child neglect cases, and we do have an entire town to testify . . ."

"They didn't neglect me." Hopper looks at me in surprise, as do the rest of them. But I have to say it. "They had Mr Smith bring me vegetables each week. They kept the power on. They didn't kick me out of the house." *Until today.*

"Sorry, kid, that's not gonna cut it. Since you never filed for emancipation, these two are about to be caught up in a lot of legal troubles. It might even get into the press." Hopper heaves a sigh and tugs his beanie back into place. "Trouble with being in big business, everything you do goes under the microscope at some time or other, don't it?" He shrugs. *Oh well, nothing I can do about that,* his expression seems to say.

"We never wanted children!" my mother snaps.

Stunned silence falls. We all watch her, waiting. Mom purses her painted lips, seems to come to a conclusion, and spills out a stream of tight, defensive sentences. "We wanted to devote ourselves to recreating history in buildings like this." She waves impatiently to

encompass the kitchen. "We came here straight from Columbia University. We bought this place for a dime. Our work on it garnered recognition. We were in demand. You and your brother were . . ." A quick touch to an earring, a tap of the foot, an elegant shrug of the shoulder, and the rapid fire monologue calms. The time for outbursts passes, folded up and put away to never be mentioned again. Meanwhile, my father pours another drink and knocks it back in one go.

"You were not planned, but for a time we thought that you two would not hinder our work. Between schooling and that church and Kato's clubs, it's not like you needed us. As we became busier and had less energy to spare for you, Roger and I decided that the best plan was to leave you here in Hawkins while we grew our clientele. All those people at that church were so fond of you, Asher," she says this with an exasperated air, "and Kato was old enough to take care of himself. We weren't worried."

"Besides, if something went wrong the state would take care of you," my father adds.

It's nice to have my earlier conviction of their bad influence be ratified, even if it's embarrassing to see them act so poorly in front of Steve and Billy and Hopper and El. They did make me after all.

"Why didn't you contact me?" I ask, my single question.

"We were not meant to be parents," is all she says.

That's the story. The brittle silence that greets it prompts my mother to click her tongue. "Go pack your things, Asher. We have a place in town. If the blizzard lifts, we can fly to New Orleans in the morning."

"New Orleans?" says Billy lowly, dangerous. "She's not going to New Orleans."

Hopper saves my mother and father from what could only be a bad decision on Billy's part. "I have a proposition," he offers. "Give the property to your daughter and never return to Hawkins, or go to jail for a long, long time."

"I beg your pardon?" says my father. "On what charges?"

"Abandonment," says Hopper.

"Being complete assholes," says Steve.

"Existing?" Billy suggests.

"Bad people," El sums up. I need to thank her for the phone call – and ask exactly what she thinks she meant by the blue – but this is hardly the time. She has an glint in her eye that should really have killed my mother minutes ago. Then again, this is El the telekinetic witch kid. She probably *could* kill my mother with a look.

Right. Let's make this end, before someone does something very, very stupid. "Mom, Dad," I say, "this is a good thing. You don't have to feel guilty about me ever again. I even have some money saved up, so I can pay for utilities and food if you want to stop."

"I think those go under child support," Hopper counters.

"But–"

Hopper pats me on the shoulder, kindly says, "Let me handle this. Danielle, Roger, why don't you two jump in your big off-roader and drive to whatever hotel you're staying at tonight. You call your lawyers and let me know when you've got the paperwork, all right? I'll get Asher to sign it and file it away here with the county court so don't you worry about coming back to collect. No need for you to bother her any more than you already have. Hey, because I'm feeling generous, I'll even give you a police escort. El?"

El zips up her padded plaid coat. "Ready." She glances at me, then Billy, and smiles. "Can I come back?" she asks us in those jerky, earnest syllables of hers.

"Uh," Hopper glances at me and the cogs are whirling behind his eyes. The wariness. He doesn't know what I know, and I don't know what he knows either. Doubtless El's told him something otherwise she wouldn't be here with him, but there will have to be a conversation in the very near future to straighten all this out.

A lightbulb goes off, his brow relaxing. "I know a bunch of kids who'll need to burn off their Thanksgiving dinners on Friday. Could I drop them out here to help you and Hargrove?"

"That will be perfect," I say. "Could you find out how Nancy Wheeler is for me?"

He frowns. "Sure. I'll give you a call."

"What kids?" demands Billy.

"That's going to be fun," Steve says, anticipating bloodshed.

Hopper ignores the boys with ease. "Joyce Byers and I will be around in the morning with them." He puts a hand on El's shoulder and steers her into the passage. "Mr Strange, Mrs Strange, if you'll follow me."

Mom and Dad leave the kitchen without a word, wrapping their dignity around their shoulders like they do their fur coats, taken from the hooks beside the grandfather clock. Hopper opens the door and the blizzard pours in, whipping my mother's blonde hair out of its clips, tugging at my father's tie. A moment suspends as we three gaze at each other, not speaking, for what is there to say. The others wait. I stand in the house that is to be mine, unmoved by the storm.

Simultaneously, Mom and Dad plaster on indifference and I feel myself dismissed from their care. They disappear into the roar and the fury and the bitter white and Hopper and El vanish after them. Steve and Billy shut the door.

An old anchor falls from my shoulders, one that I've carried for as long as I can remember. My knees fold underneath me and I fall gracelessly to the floorboards. The boys slide down the door to sit shoulder to shoulder, windswept and stunned. Billy chuckles, leans his head back too fast, smacks his wound, swears viciously.

Some sort of dam inside me breaks and suddenly I'm laughing and I can't stop. It's all too much, my small human mind can't handle it, and the tangled mess of adrenaline and fear and rewritten reality and long-held stress expels itself in the atmosphere as uncontainable

laughter. It sets Billy off, and Steve, and we're in hysterics, curling inwards, until we're in too much pain to continue and we gasp air into our lungs. The emotion spills, drifts, disperses itself around us three, collapsed on my cold entrance hall floor, surrounded by the shriek and the moan and the creaking of old timber. Sharp air shoots up through the gaps between the boards and washes over my face, cooling it. The old, dusty chandelier hangs above me. The fuzzy lightbulbs throb in time to my heartbeat.

How odd that that world keeps turning and the sun will rise on a snow-covered Hawkins and nothing much has changed in that grand scheme of things. *What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.* Even the moving green.

It is I who is different. I'm still Asher Strange and I still believe in God and tomorrow I will make oatmeal for breakfast and in August I will go to Yale, but I've seen the stranger things of life and I want to see more. Let me see more.

Billy gets his breath back first. "I'm going to teach both of you poker and take all your money. You won't be laughing then." He touches the back of his head and grimaces.

"Yeah, yeah," says Steve, "suck it up, Miami."

"San Diego, asshole."

"Do I look like I care?"

Billy groans, pushing himself to his feet, and steps over to where I am sprawled. He winks at me, smirk firmly in place, blue eyes gleaming with good humour, divinely made. He reaches out to me. I clasp his hand. Palm to palm, callous to callous, the scars on his knuckles bumpy and thick under my fingertips. Warm and strong, his hand nearly envelopes mine.

"Thanks for saving my life," I say.

His laugh is little more than an exhalation, his expression fond, and it suits him more than any frown or glare. "Thanks for saving mine."

He hauls me to my feet.

Notes for the Chapter:

14/01/2021 Update: I FINISHED THE BOOK! It's called Welcome to New York, is a dystopian YA set in current times, and will be up on Amazon around about April. (hard copies also available but you'll need to contact me) Head on over to my instagram (@towrta) for updates :D

10. ALYSSA

Summary for the Chapter:

Obligatory Original Novel Promotion Time!

So, if you like Strange Places, I'm guessing you have a fondness for the good ol' 'traumatised girl meets traumatising boy' trope. Well, look no further, for I have written an entire novel centred around this.

Now presenting:

ALYSSA

First in the Welcome to New York series

Enjoy!

ALYSSA

Welcome to New York Book One

By Sarah Powell

Alyssa is a combat-trained sixteen-year-old from New Zealand. She's courageous, ambitious, and highly skilled; she needs to be because she's heading to New York. The city is populated by Marines, rebels, vigilantes, the wealthy elite and the hardworking lower class, entirely cut off from the rest of the world, imprisoned in self-sustaining anarchy. Alyssa can't wait.

But then, days after arriving, she's kidnapped. Alyssa finds herself trapped amongst strangers who challenge everything she's been taught, and she doesn't know how to sift the fact from the fiction. What's really going on in New York City? Who can she trust?

She wants answers.

But first she needs to survive.

*(Find it on Kindle today! *celebratory-kazu-sound*)*

Author's Note:

If you'd like others to find this story, please leave a kudos!